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THE HORROR ISSUE
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HUNT: SHOWDOWN
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Issue 328 / April 2018

"You're right to quake in your boots, dear reader"

Feel that shiver down your spine? No, it's not another freak snowstorm on the way – that's the *chill of fear!* And you're right to quake in your boots, dear reader, for inside these pages lurks our most spooktacular preview feature ever.

Between the bestial savagery of Werewolf: The Apocalypse, the sinister blood-sipping of Vampyr, and the menacing madness of Call Of Cthulhu, even Vincent Price would take pause – and you'll find many more terrors than that inside.

All that, plus our surprising verdict on Metal Gear Survive, a behind-the-scenes chat with the weirdest indie studio around, dwarves in space, the secrets of gaming's many dungeons, and much, much more besides.

And if you like this issue, it's a great time to subscribe to GamesMaster! You can either grab one of our normal subs packages over on p42, and get yourself a gaming headset absolutely free, or you can take advantage of our spring sale for the cheapest possible deal (five issues for £5!) over on p86.

Enjoy your GM!

Robin Valentine – Editor

GET MORE FROM YOUR GM!

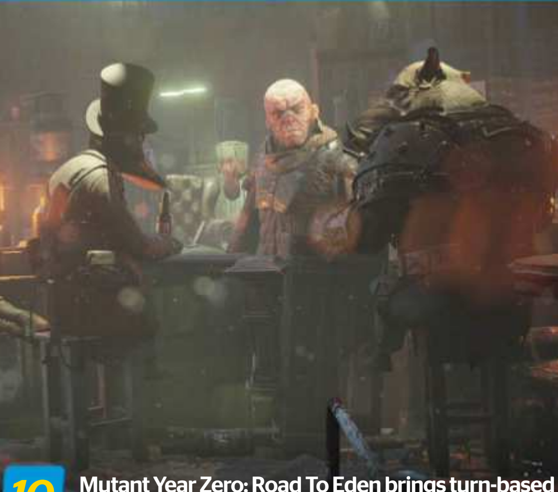


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...or subscribe. See p42 for details.

EDITOR'S CHOICE
MY TOP PICKS THIS ISSUE



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32 We've got Warhammer 40K games galore – starting with grimdark gang war in Necromunda.



77 My favourite game of the month is without doubt Into The Breach – check out our review.

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Meet The Magazine's Makers!



THE MOST DEDICATED TEAM IN THE BUSINESS

The only *scary* thing about the GamesMaster crew is how *horrifyingly* dedicated we are to bringing you the best magazine around! Oh, and also Robin eats people sometimes.



Rob Crossland

Thanks to four whole days of snow, Rob got to indulge in one of his favourite hobbies this month: driving around empty roads in a 4x4 and feeling smug. He even made a fiver pulling someone else out of a snowdrift, thus doubling his monthly earnings.

Favourite horror game:
Resident Evil



Sam Greer

We should have known better than to assign Sam a FInal Fantasy game to review. It's reignited her obsession with maligned spin-off Lightning Returns, reducing all conversation to just a series of pitches for features about a pink-haired fashionista punching a god.

Favourite horror game:
Alien: Isolation

Ian Evenden

With our usual subeditor Miriam off on a lovely peregrination around India, we've had to bring in hired gun Ian to fill her shoes and cover her desk with crumbs. Without someone to check our spelling and knock our words into shape, the magazine would be turtolly unreedabul.

Favourite horror game:
Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

See p42 for details



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FANBASE

The best of your emails, tweets, and carrier pigeon death threats

The Witcher 3's DLC is some of the best ever made – but it can take over 100 hours to even get to it.

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

There's just not enough time in the day, says Stuart

Getting older isn't so bad if you're a gamer. Working helps to pay for more of what you love, namely new consoles and new games to play on them.

The only problem I have is games these days are such a time investment that I don't get the chance to see them to the end, never mind all the DLC. I'm ashamed to say I've not been able to finish the Witcher 3 or any of its great expansions because it just takes too much time.

I'm finding myself going back to play the older classics again such as Streets Of Rage or a bit of the older Mario games as they are great pick-up-and-play titles. I'm finding that I miss the older style of games with three lives and two continues to meet my hour or two of game time. It's something I wish developers would look back into making. Not retro-like epics, but classic side-on shoot-em-ups and 2D brawlers from Capcom's glory days. I think the indie scene is great for this type of game, but the big boys should jump back on the bandwagon.

Thanks for so many happy years of reading and watching Gamesmaster. 25 years has gone so quickly!

Stuart Gregory, email



A lot of old arcade games are actually only an hour or two long – but the high difficulty extended play time.

It does feel a little unfair sometimes that the games we played as kids were mostly pretty short, and now that we're adults with barely any free time, suddenly everything's a 100-hour open-world epic…

Still, too much of a good thing is better than not enough, we suppose – and as you say, there are loads of brilliant smaller indie experiences out there these days too! ■

WIN!

Got an opinion? Have even the barest grasp of words and how to put them together? The best letter bags a free mystery prize!*

*Don't forget to include your postal address and chosen gaming format!



Weekend warrior

I have grievances to air and you're my favourite agony aunt.

I am a FIFA player. Ultimate Team has drawn me in, I've found communities on Facebook and I've made quite a few friends through it. Also, judging by the messages I receive on Xbox Live, some mortal enemies too…

I'm a decent player, I accept that my mistakes cost me games. I don't think EA sit in their dark tower deciding when we win or lose. I don't even believe that if I have more stats I deserve to win, or that EA reward bad players with better pulls from packs (if you play FIFA you'll meet many of these conspiracy theorists).

No, my particular bugbear is in EA's new patch for the Weekend League. It can be a brutally hard game mode, which has you facing random players around the world over 40 games for rewards. If you are playing the Weekend League or WL qualifying and you press the Home button, you get an instant forfeit of your game. This was EA's fix to help prevent people doing the 'no-loss glitch' [which allows people to win games automatically via a bug].

This must be the laziest patch in the world. If I want to start a party, record game clips, take screen shots etc, I don't feel I dare. The game can be paused and the button pressed safely, but I dare not press it. Every win is precious and I don't rage quit, but limiting the ability to use key features is just madness – they should correct the game at their end. Also, I have a toddler who loves pressing that button on my controller! I understand the need to stop cheats, but surely there's another way?

I've pressed it by accident before, but I feel I'm being punished for others' mistakes and exploitative behaviours.

Anyway, I'm off into the Weekend League… keep up the good work.

Jamie Garbutt, email

Consider your grievance well and truly aired Jamie. That does sound like a really annoying solution. Have a little sympathy for the developers, though – bugs like that can be really difficult to fix, especially with such a huge playerbase. The developers are probably more stressed out about all this than anyone!

Shadow play

I made a decision not to buy or play Shadow of the Colossus back when it was released in 2005, and I stand by it.



READER REVIEW

Fiona Li writes in with their verdict on **Iconoclasts**

This platformer is how I imagine a 2D Ratchet & Clank game might look! Robin is a mechanic on the run from a corrupt government in a world where engineering is illegal. Armed with wrench and stun-gun, she sets out to discover why.

The story is strange and hard to follow, but the charming characters and the lovely chiptune soundtrack make up for it.

The boss battles are engaging and keep me on my toes. They range from medium-sized enemies to screen-filling foes but size doesn't matter – it's about strategy as you figure out their weak spots and timing.

Shooting and jumping feel satisfying but the wrench is weak. Robin can also stomp enemies, and use her wrench to swing to higher locations, and travel on ziplines.

Unfortunately, the puzzles and some questionable level design decisions bog down the experience.

If you're waiting for the next Ratchet & Clank game, this will tide you over.

75%



"THE IMAGE OF THEIR SAD EYES AS YOU KILL THEM HAS STUCK WITH ME"

I don't even need to play it as I know what the game is about – a series of boss battles one after the other, but with bosses that actually feel like living, breathing creatures who your character basically slaughters for no real reason. These things have done nothing to your character, and the haunting image of their sad eyes as you kill them has stuck with me since I read a review of the game in a PSM2 magazine back in 2005.

Maybe I'm missing the point of the game. I'm sure there are those who will be annoyed and point out it's more than that, and some will no doubt say that God Of War and others like it depict much worse scenes, but I fail to find this sort of game appealing or what is so great about it. To me it's the gaming equivalent of cruelty to animals.

I'm aware most games allow you to attack animals – Tekken has allowed you to beat up kangaroos and bears for years, and God Of War has you kill giant animals too – but the difference is they are actually trying to kill you.

I just have no interest in killing 16 poor monsters who for the most part ignore you, just want to live out their lives and only attack if provoked. To me Shadow Of The Colossal Cruelty would be better title.

Martyn Jamieson, email

We see where you're coming from Martyn, but part of what makes SOTC so good is the way it encourages the player to think about videogame violence. Not every game is about playing the good guy and feeling powerful, after all. You should definitely check out the game for yourself – you might be surprised by it!

Fright bytes

What's the best horror game ever?

Bloodborne. The hellish descent into a cosmic nightmare is incredibly soul-wrenching. Absolute masterpiece.

Ben, @BretHillington

Without question Alien: Isolation. Recreated the atmosphere and feel of the original films. Not knowing where the alien is gives sweaty palms.

Paul Thomas, @tazman1983

My vote is for Project Zero/Fatal Frame. I've played quite a few horror games over the years and that's the only one that made me take off my headphones, turn on the light, and take a breather.

C:\Debra\Beretta, @Debra_Beretta

Head over to p31 to see our picks!



OFF THE CHART!

The hot topics you've been gabbing about



33% The scariest horror game ever
26% Your favourite open worlds
20% Metal Gear Survive controversy
11% The best Warhammer videogames
10% Gaming's coolest dungeons

YOUR TOP 5 MOST WANTED

The most exciting upcoming games, as voted for by you on our Facebook and Twitter pages



1 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Format PS4, XO **ETA** 26 October

Did you know, RDR's now been in the top spot longer than the average life expectancy of someone in Wild West times? It's true! (It isn't.)



2 GOD OF WAR

Format PS4 **ETA** 20 April

How long do you think it takes Kratos to sort his body paint out in the mornings? Amazing he gets out of the house early enough to batter all those gods, really.



3 THE LAST OF US PART II

Format PS4 **ETA** Winter 2019

Flip to p30 for the latest on this hotly anticipated sequel – including some tantalising info about a furry new addition to the cast…



4 SPIDER-MAN

Format PS4 **ETA** Summer

That's it, we are officially, one hundred per cent out of arachnid puns, and the game hasn't even launched yet. Oh, wait, no, we just spied-a few more…



5 YAKUZA 6: THE SONG OF LIFE

Format PS4 **ETA** 17 April

Our expert reviewer's already hard at work playing through this sprawling Japanese crime epic – you'll find our full verdict in next issue.

SCREENSHOT SHOWCASE

This month's best snaps

Assassin's Creed Origins
Natalie Austin, Facebook

Shadow Of The Colossus
Barrie Rimmer, Facebook

Need For Speed: Payback
Dale Butterworth, @buttedj

Injustice 2
Liam Mountain, Facebook

Uncharted: The Lost Legacy
Oliver Smith, @olismith93

Horizon Zero Dawn
Rob Stapleton, @robstapleton87

Assassin's Creed Origins
Rosa Hughes, Facebook

Super Mario Odyssey
Georgina Howlett, @howlettwrites

SOCIAL GROUSING

Wisdom and weirdness from our bustling social media channels



I'd love to see a mag get away with a beheading on the cover nowadays.

Wil Overton, @Kosmikat



Space Crusade on the Amiga is the best Warhammer videogame ever because it had that dude at the beginning going "Raaaaaah" that at the time was some of the best graphics you'd ever seen.

Jehovah Lazarus, Facebook

MANIAC OF THE MONTH!



No horror game has ever made me freak out more than when the ghosts chase me in Pac-Man...

Jake Mcaulay, @Thedirtwizard



GTAV is basically Rockstar handing you the keys and saying: "Young man, one day all of this could be yours. No wait, it *is* yours."

RL&H Studios, @RedZRedZ99



I love Silent Hill 2 because of the atmosphere – not knowing what was going on but always suspecting you might be the problem.

Jonathan Wright, @jonw23



Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine is great because it's like what the Master Chief would be like if he was very, very British.

Stuart Cullen, @FuryAc3

EDEN FLOW

The going gets ducks, and the ducks get going in **Mutant Year Zero: Road To Eden**

ASK QUESTIONS NEVER

Wait your turn... then shoot the heck outta your enemies.



Use the environment to sneak up on your foes. Er, as a giant boar and a six-foot duck.



Line of sight will prove important in battle; the more a character is obscured, the harder they are to hit.



Ignoring those wings for now, a height advantage – and even the target being well lit – confers a tasty bonus.

As if a giant mutated sociopathic duck with a crossbow wasn't good enough, look! He even has *a top hat*.



Although humans are social beasts, it's surprisingly difficult to get a large group of people to unanimously agree on anything. How heartwarming, then, to see that so many videogame developers agree that we are guaranteed a post-apocalyptic future in which most people are dead and many of those who remain are hideously mutated in some way. The latest brick in this wall we are all hurtling towards has caught our attention. Primarily, we admit, because it features a talking duck, with a crossbow and what appear to be cropped jeans.

As you may have guessed from the title, mutants feature quite heavily here. Based on the pen and paper roleplaying series Mutant, Road To Eden takes place in a world where climate change and disease – with a significant helping hand from nuclear war – have seen humanity as we know it replaced by mutants. Deformed creatures are a bizarre yet common sight, like a shoe on top of a bus stop.

Developer Bearded Ladies and publisher Funcom are keen to draw comparisons with XCOM, using it as shorthand for what they hope will be gripping, strategic battles. Although little gameplay detail has been seen so far, hints about its depth have already been dropped.

Combat will be turn-based, but walking your band of freaks about outside of fighting takes place in real time. This means you need to be aware of your surroundings while exploring, and allows you to place your team members in the perfect positions for an ambush; or courageously sneak past enemies.

Quack job

To return to the real issue here, the water fowl is called Dux (really) and is hilariously described as "a duck with an attitude problem". The po-faced porcine you may have spotted is Bormin the boar, and the deceptively normal-looking human is Selma. Together, they will murder many things on a journey to what they hope will prove to be safety and salvation.

Add upgradeable weapons and team members into the mix, and there'll be plenty to get your teeth into. If you're not already interested, well, you're a very demanding guy or gal; but perhaps we'll push you over the edge of the cliff of excitement with this. Bearded Ladies boasts not only Payday designer Ulf Andersson on the books, but also former Hitman designers. This is a team that knows exactly what it's doing. "It's an unusual label for a game, but 'tactical adventure' really fits the bill, no duck pun intended," says Andersson, who we suspect is lying about that pun.

The few enemies revealed are described only as 'ghouls', although early footage suggests that we might also come up against mechanised baddies. Surely we'll stumble across other mutants, though? We look forward to punk rock voles, cows forming militias, and street gangs of surprisingly aggressive hamsters. At least one of those is possible, surely? ■

"COMBAT WILL BE TURN-BASED, BUT WALKING YOUR BAND OF FREAKS ABOUT TAKES PLACE IN REAL TIME"

HURLEY ACCESS
ADVENTURES IN EARLY ACCESS
With your host… ★★ LEON HURLEY ★★

GET ME OUT OF HERE!

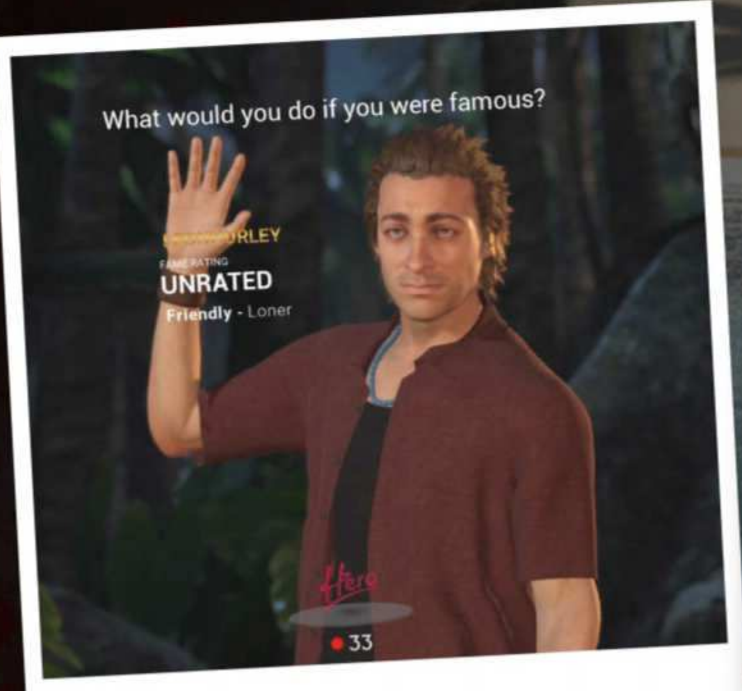
Leon learns there's no I in team as he plays to the camera in SOS

Post-PlayerUnknown's BattleGrounds, everyone's after a slice of the battle royale pie. SOS has a clever gimmick though: its action is built around a reality TV show where players fight to recover the relics they need to escape from a tropical island full of monsters. There are 16 contestants but only four relics. You can see how that's going to end. So obviously, we sent Leon to audition.



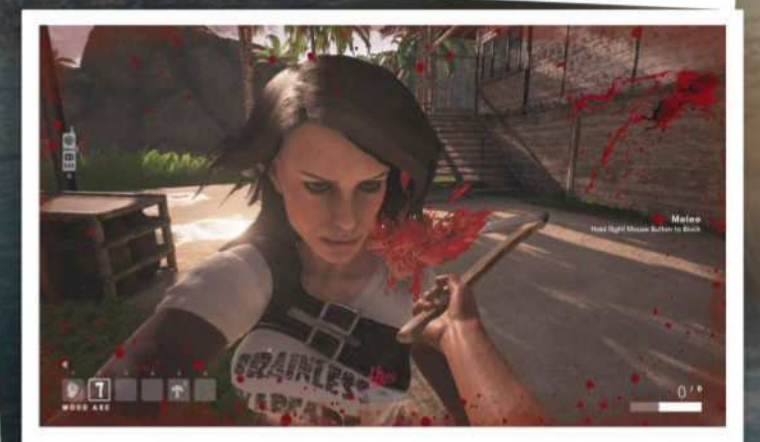
10 MINUTES

Things start off on the beach and I immediately start looking for things that might help with not being dead. All I know are the basic rules – 16 people arrive on an island, find four relics, and escape. The twist is that only the people with relics are allowed on the evac chopper, meaning whatever alliances are formed can quickly fall apart if you're a relic short. Relics before friends every time. That's a moot point for me as, so far, I've met no people to team up with or betray. However, I have found an axe, some medical kits, and the weird monkey-like monsters that run screaming at your face when they see you. They are… so not fun. The opposite of fun, you might say. I spend a few frantic moments back-pedalling in a dark hut trying to kill a furious zombie-gibbon that's clawing at my eyes.



0 MINUTES

I'm used to starting a game with no idea what's going on. After all, only tryhards learn loser things like 'buttons', 'rules', and 'why is any of this happening?'. But even I'm a little surprised by the TV show start to SOS. I mean, I knew it was presented like a battle royale reality television programme, but I wasn't expecting to see my character stand awkwardly in front of a camera for a bumbled live introduction. "Hello," I mumble nervously into the mic as I press the wrong emote button and hold my hands up in surrender and then wave. Among the 15 other contestants – who pull off flawless waves and dances, while shouting soundbites like "I came here to win!" or "I smell like victory!" – I might as well have just drawn a target on my head and worn a T-shirt saying 'The First To Die'.



15 MINUTES

Now I meet my first 'other contestant.' We both freeze and, as they wave, I offer a tentative "Hello? Friendly?" They are not. And explain this by throwing a grenade. While I'm fairly annoyed about that, I figure I can just not be where the grenade is and run away. Except when the grenade explodes, it's full of giant mosquitoes. *Who makes a grenade full of giant mosquitoes?!* I think it surprises the other person as much as me, as we both start dancing around and flailing axes at each other. In the insect-filled confusion I manage to get away but I'm so nearly dead the next mutant monkey I find kills me. However, the good news is that while I'm dead I can spectate on everyone else playing and get a crash course watching teams work together to get relics off the monsters that protect them and then fight each other to escape.

MEDKIT



25 MINUTES

Things look up on my next go when I make a friend. I see them by a guard tower and, in the time-honoured tradition of these sort of games, we instantly freeze, both trying to decide if the other's going to be friendly. They *say* they want to be but I've played plenty of things like this where 'friendly' is the last thing I hear before a brutal murder. I call it 'the DayZ hello'. The other player holds their hand up in a wave and I press the emote button to do the same and *oh my God they're running at me*. We high five. Like, a genuine, friendly gesture with (checks) definitely no me-killing. *Nice.* Apparently, in SOS, that loud, over-the-top slap announces an alliance. I'm in a team! What is this strange feeling? Is... is this... happiness?



35 MINUTES

Yep, it's happiness. Within minutes we make two more friends and start to explore the buildings, grabbing supplies and battling the monster monkeys. We've even got our own channel on the walkie-talkies so we can talk if we get split up. It's still early in all the chaos so we run around a temple area grabbing weapons, medical supplies, and the flare gun we need to signal extraction. Obviously for that we need relics and, almost on cue, the radio crackles into life. "Guys! I got a Relic Monster!" It's basically a larger, angrier monkey creature that the four of us hack to death. We have a relic! At this point none of us have really thought about the fact that we need one each.



40 MINUTES

The celebration leads to a flare being sent up and a helicopter passes by, dropping supplies – something the (real life) audience have voted on. We get a crate of axes and one of medical supplies. But before we can celebrate with an axe and bandage jungle party, someone calls in an actual extraction. Now we're on the clock and the extraction site is miles away. We set off towards the distant smoke with seven minutes left on the clock. It's a long way there and tricky to get to – other teams are nearby, which is dangerous, and we have to navigate difficult terrain with lots of sheer drops, all while battling monsters. That's when the betrayal happens.



45 MINUTES

One of 'us' pulls a gun and opens fire. It's proper sinister stuff as the previously chatty player goes silent, pumping bullet after bullet at former teammates. I'm dead almost instantly. Another of the team says "Dude, no," as he's riddled with bullets. Now a spectator, I unhappily watch the killer chasing the first guy I made friends with – he's my favourite random online person I've met today. However, then there's *double betrayal*, as they also pull out a gun – *was no one telling the truth here?* At least the betrayer gets what's coming to them, although in the final fight for extraction another team mops up everyone else and gets away with all the relics.



1 HOUR

I do manage my own extraction escape in the next round but in the most humiliating way possible. So if I tell you, you can't mention it to *anyone*. The game goes terribly from the start. I completely fail to find any decent weapons or supplies, and nearly get finished off by monkeys in the first 10 minutes. To make matters worse, I'm still without a team and nearly dead when extraction is called. There's not a lot I can do at this point except hide in a bush. I watch teams fight each other over the extraction point from between the leaves. I'm not sure what I'm going to achieve until one of the last two people drops their relic, kills the other player, and then steals their relic to escape. I can't quite believe my luck. I double check the maths: one relic left, one me... I run out, grab it, and jump on the rope to freedom.

PAY-PER-VIEW

You wouldn't think there'd be space for any more battle royale games between PUBG, Fortnite, and all the rest. SOS manages to make room thanks to that unbalanced rescue mechanic. It's genius in a way: you can't hope to get anywhere alone, but your team can fall apart in an instant if there aren't enough relics for everyone. Then there's the TV presentation, which is so well done it's hard not to fall into character. This is an enticing game with a great hook, and at such an early stage of Early Access. New maps are an obvious step to adding more, as well as mode variations, new characters, and gear. Jump on it before it blows up so you can say you were playing it before everyone else.





"It highlights how lacklustre Sony's PlayStation Now really is"

In light of the recent overhaul of Xbox Game Pass, Aaron Potter argues it's time for Sony to rethink its approach with PlayStation Now



Xbox One owners have been going through a tough time recently. While the platform has certainly gained a 'boutique' appeal for those wishing to enjoy their games with eye-wateringly good visuals, the introduction of the S and X console models did nothing to rectify the absence of first-party exclusives. But fortunes seem to have changed, with the announcement that Xbox Game Pass will soon be upgraded to include all future and existing first-party games.

Of course, such a colossal (and potentially game-changing) act of good will is to be expected when considering how far from grace Xbox has fallen – compared to both the 360 days and the continuing commercial and critical successes of PS4.

Stream machine

Microsoft has at least always done a great job of catering to players who value the ability to revisit classic games, and this latest shot in the arm further highlights how lacklustre Sony's competing PlayStation Now really is.

Both subscription services have their pros and cons. PlayStation Now features a library of more than 500 games, for example, while Xbox Game Pass currently touts a little over 100. Despite this, the value proposition quickly tips toward Microsoft's offering, with Xbox Game Pass letting players download the games directly as opposed to merely streaming them. On the list of gamers' greatest hindrances, latency is right up there with loot boxes and microtransactions.

If Sony is to similarly do good by consumers with regards to re-experiencing old games, even if it might not feel the need to, what should it do? It's very unlikely that it would ever release the likes of Days Gone, Death Stranding, and other far-off first-party exclusives right on their release date with PlayStation Now. Rather, the prospect of merging the service with the wildly successful PS Plus into one streamlined subscription makes more sense.

The ideal solution would be for Sony to finally switch PlayStation Now from a streaming service to the more user-friendly download experience Xbox Game Pass provides, but there's no guarantee this would be an easy fix. After all, we're still waiting on more minor improvements such as being able to change online IDs, despite years of community outcry, and bigger changes could still prove a huge mountain to climb.

PlayStation Now continues to be a weak spot in the otherwise perfectly respectable online eco-system Sony has created. But with Xbox One owners soon being able to play not just classic, but new and exclusive titles for an extremely low rate, Microsoft boasts the subscription service edge that places community at the forefront. ■

> "XBOX GAME PASS LETS PLAYERS DOWNLOAD THE GAMES DIRECTLY, AS OPPOSED TO STREAMING THEM"

STATS MAGIC The gaming month in facts and figures

60%
A survey conducted by TV channel Dave to celebrate the return of Go 8 Bit, reveals that 60% of British gamers feel the hobby is a key part of their lives.

3 in 5
The survey also showed that we're are anything but anti-social, with three in five of those polled playing specifically to connect with friends.

55%
Of those surveyed, 55% said they play videogames to help them unwind and dump their stresses.

3 in 10
Almost a third believe that playing games has helped them to deal with a mental health issue or concern.





“The game’s portrayal of history is selective at best, with many discrepancies”

Kingdom Come: Deliverance’s grand claims of total historical accuracy should be taken with a pinch of salt, argues Jack Yarwood



Historical accuracy in games is an admirable goal, but Warhorse Studios’ Kingdom Come: Deliverance (review on p66) has raised some interesting questions about the responsibility of creating realistic games and the problems therein. The game has attracted some significant controversy for its depiction of Bohemia as exclusively white, with no queer or disabled people present, in spite of there being no evidence this was the case.

When confronted with this, studio lead Daniel Vávra shut down debate on the topic by claiming “historical accuracy” and that: “There were no black people in medieval Bohemia. Period.”. Many have leapt to the developer’s defence, using the same excuse for the lack of diversity in the game, but it’s my personal belief that this argument is made in poor faith.

One reason why I believe this is because of Vávra’s online statements about diversity in games and his vocal support of Gamergate, a movement that fostered antagonistic behaviour against minority voices within the games industry.

It’s important to be able to trust a historical source, and through his behaviour, I’d argue Vávra has forfeited that right entirely. Coupled with this, his reluctance to even acknowledge the debate around this topic has led some of the game’s most fervent supporters to blindly accept the game’s depiction of history without a greater level of analysis.

“SOME CHARACTERS SPEAK IN AMERICAN ACCENTS, AND YOU CAN FIND A TRAFFIC CONE”

History boys

The problem with this is that making a 100% historically accurate game is pretty much impossible, considering how much we know about the period and the movement of certain groups at the time. This gives a significant amount of power to the storyteller to fill in the gaps.

Not only this, but the game’s portrayal of history is selective at best, with there being many discrepancies that haven’t earned the same kind of vocal support. For example, some characters speak in American accents, you can find a modern-day traffic cone hidden in an area of the map (an Easter egg left over from beta testing), and there are magic potions that let you save and reset your skills.

This certainly isn’t a call for a boycott of the game. Instead, it’s an encouragement to engage more closely with the game’s historical themes, and scrutinise its methods and aims.

Where has the game made concessions on how it depicts 15th century Bohemia, and where has it stayed rigid? Why were these decisions made? And what do they reveal about the process of making it?

Non-contemporary historical sources, particularly fictional ones, are often coloured by personal prejudices. It’s important to recognise them and to not give them a free pass. ■



GM Most Wanted

What’s most tickling the team’s fancy this month





ROBIN’S PICK

Greedfall

My soft spot for Spiders’ line of action-RPGs is well-documented in this mag. Sure they’re clunky and awkward, and basically all desperate to be The Witcher, but gosh do they take risks with their settings. This latest title’s clearly no exception, telling a tale of 17th century colonial powers descending on a island of myth and monsters. If it’s as weird and provocative as the studio’s past efforts, I’ll be totally ready to look past some jank.

PS4, XO, PC - 2018



SAM’S PICK

Biomutant

This game had me at “you play as a mutant raccoon who does kung-fu, has cybernetic implants, and if you want you can make them pink”. That’s surely videogame gold right there. Never mind that you can pilot a giant mechanical wind-up hand, or a glider, or even a mech suit. That you can scale cliffs and explore a huge open world. Or that you fight big fluffy monsters that look like radioactive Muppets.

PS4, XO, PC - 2018



ROCKIN' DOLL

From astronaut to Mountie, Barbie's no stranger to unusual jobs. Now Mattel has released Grave Robber… er, Tomb Raider Barbie. It's is a tie-in for the upcoming film, and borrows the likeness of lead actress Alicia Vikander. She's armed with a tiny ice axe, though her signature bow and quiver seem to be absent, as is the traditional arsenal of guns. How's Barbie supposed to do murders, eh?



FAMILIAR VOICES

Though Death Stranding has just been showcasing the talents of Norman Reedus and Mads Mikkelsen so far, fresh talent has recently been hired for the game. Troy Baker (The Last Of Us) and Emily O'Brien (Batman: The Enemy Within) have been cast in unannounced roles.



NOT BURNTOUT

Burnout Paradise, a fan favourite in the popular racing series, has received the remastering treatment on PS4 and Xbox One, with PC to follow. It includes all previously released downloadable content, which includes the likes of Back to the Future's DeLorean.

ONLY WAY TO WIN

…is to play! Sam Barlow (Her Story) has released the first chapter of his next project, WarGames. A reboot of the 1983 film, about a high school student who unwittingly hacks into a US military supercomputer, the game will retell the story with new characters and updated technology. It's available to play on iOS and Steam now.

Topping the leaderboard this issue

YOU WIN

YOU LOSE

No, we don't want to continue thanks



WHAT THE ****?

Thimbleweed Park, the well received point-and-click adventure from Ron Gilbert, has released new DLC that, for just £1.69, will uncensor the game's swears. The bleeping out was originally included for stylistic reasons, a humorous little touch that made the swearing funnier, making this release all the more baffling. Not as baffling as making it a paid-for piece of content, given how little it changes.



CLOSING TIME

Shopping chains Toys R Us and Maplin, once solid sources of games and gaming tech respectively, have gone into administration following recent financial troubles. They may have been bettered in pricing by tax-shy online behemoths such as Amazon for a long time, but it's still sad to see these brick-and-mortar staples hitting such hard times. Here's hoping all staff affected are able to land on their feet.



UNDOING THE PAST

1995 SNES RPG classic Chrono Trigger has received a PC port. Which would be cause for celebration, if it weren't a port of its mobile version… That means low resolutions and poor assets, ugly 'pixel-smoothing', and an awkward interface built for touchscreens. It's an absolute stinker of a port for a game that deserves better. We bet Square Enix wishes it could travel back in time to do this properly…

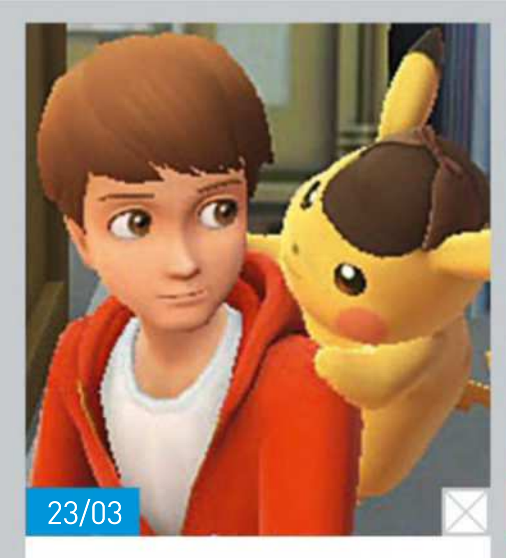


OH NEWS!

The Russian state news network Perviy Kanal ('First Channel') made a blunder during a segment on the war in Syria, airing footage of military sim ArmA 3 instead. Though the station claimed it was due to human error, it's hard not to wonder if someone didn't deliberately sneak it in, hoping nobody would notice. The game looks pretty realistic but come on, it's not *that* convincing. What's next, car chases from GTAV?

THE GM TO DO LIST

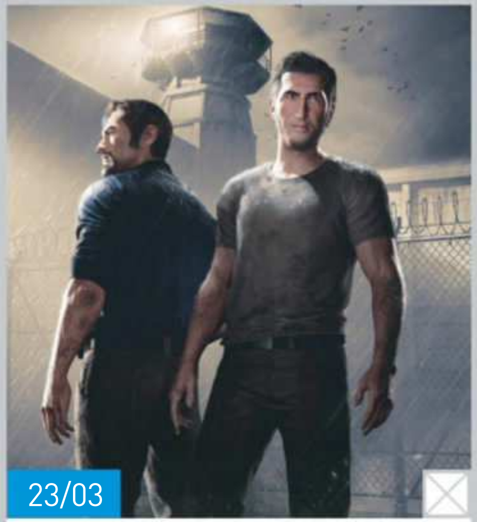
Crucial dates for your gaming diary. If you only do one thing this month, eat, but otherwise make a note of these events...



23/03

POK-ING AROUND

Pop on your deerstalker and do a spot of sleuthing with Detective Pikachu, out today.



23/03

CRIME PAYS

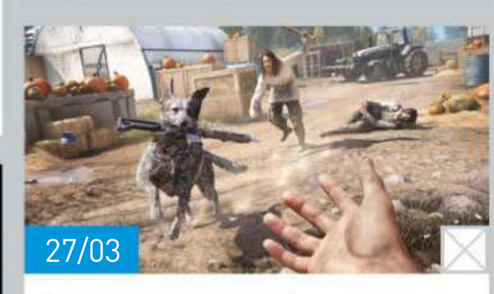
Rope in a mate for the ultimate co-op prison break, as A Way Out hits shop shelves.



23/03

A TALL TAIL

Get your Ghibli fix in Ni No Kuni 2: Revenant Kingdom, out today.



27/03

THE BAD SEED

Praise the Lord; today's the day you can begin taking down an evil cult in Far Cry 5.



29/03

MINI MOUSELESS

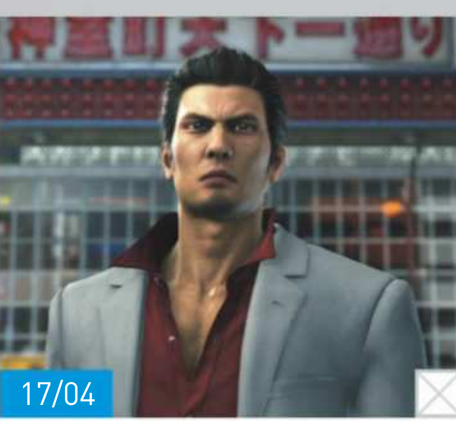
Grab a C64 Mini today and you can pretend it's 1982 all over again. You weirdo.



10/04

DEAD ON TIME

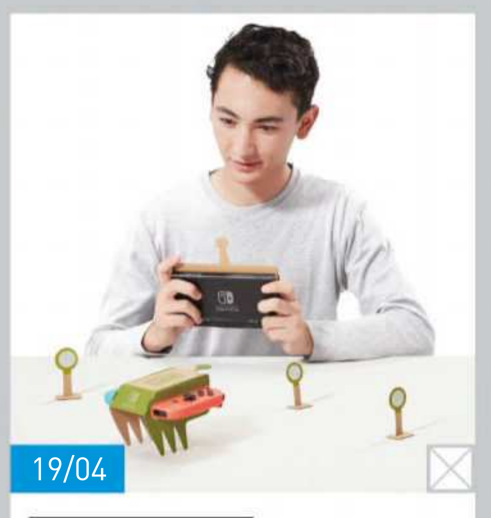
Save your people from annihilation at the hands of ogres in Extinction, out today.



17/04

GANGING UP

Got room in your life for a 100-hour crime story? Of course you do. Yakuza 6 is out now!



19/04

CARD SHARP

GM329 is on sale now, featuring the latest on Nintendo Labo and much more!

INCOMING

Six big releases headed to a format near you...

01 

Nintendo Labo
Format Switch
Out 27 April

02 

Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze
Format Switch
Out 4 May

03 

Conan Exiles
Format PS4, XO, PC
Out 8 May

04 

Attack On Titan 2
Format Switch, PS4, XO
Out 20 May

05 

Dark Souls Remastered
Format Switch, PS4, XO, PC
Out 25 May

06 

Onrush
Format PS4, XO
Out 5 June


CREEP SHOW
Be afraid... be very afraid



Horror games are special. No genre in gaming has gone through quite so many hideous transformations over the years and given us such fiendishly grim delights. From Resident Evil to Outlast, this is a genre constantly reshaping itself like the monster from The Thing. Adapting to new trends, setting new trends, horror games have been innovative in a way that's always been a thrill. After all, developers need new tricks to keep scaring us.

So we're looking ahead (we're afraid of what's behind us!) to the rest of 2018 and beyond, picking out the most interesting horror titles lurking over the horizon. All sorts of nasty surprises are waiting for you, from vampiric RPGs to hordes of hungry rats; this coming year's selection of horror titles are like nothing before. We've sunk our teeth in and can tell you which are going to deliver the biggest chills and thrills of the year...

So turn the page... if you dare!

You can never be sure who's trying to raise Cthulhu from the netherrealm, so be careful who you trust.



Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Cyanide **ETA** Autumn

CALL OF CTHULHU

Everything's deader down where it's wetter

Darkwater Island does not radiate good vibes. The murky jetty, a killer whale lying gutted on the shore, quiet mutterings about something ungodly happening in the ruins of a nearby warehouse… everything is telling you to flee without delay. But as private detective Edward Pierce, your job is to find out exactly what's going on. Tentacles and all.

To be honest, the situation on Darkwater Island is bad enough without the threat of something hellish tapping at the windowpane. You've been sent by the father of the renowned artist Sarah Hawkins to get to the bottom of her death. Fire ripped through her house, killing her, her child, and her husband – yet the police report was suspiciously vague. Something cultish is bubbling around the fringes of Darkwater Island.

Edward Pierce might be the main character in Call Of Cthulhu, but he's not the only person trying to navigate Darkwater Island's enigmatic surroundings. You'll literally see the world through someone else's eyes, as every so often Pierce will be indisposed, leaving you to play other characters with their own skills and missions. Each one is related to Pierce's story in one way or another, giving you a valuable alternative perspective on all the dodgy goings-on.

How do you make Cthulu laugh?

Clues are scattered around the various scenes you'll be investigating. Find them, then, using your forensic skills, pay close attention to them to uncover a lead. Perhaps it'll be a fingerprint or a revealing detail. Depending on your investigation rank, you can pick a handful of leads to make a deduction that will determine what steps you'll take next. Pick

> "IN THE WORLD OF CALL OF CTHULHU, MADNESS LETS YOU SEE PAST THE MORTAL REALM"



the wrong leads, and it'll take you a lot longer to get to the bottom of things.

Not too keen on playing detective all the time? There's no need to take the subtle approach, as how you tackle each quest is up to you. Say you want to get into a warehouse. An especially dodgy one where someone – or something – is hiding out. Either sneak into it using a concealed entrance, cause a distraction to get the guards out of the way, or convince the woman who owns the place to let you in for a look around.

Give him ten tickles

Things don't always go to plan though, and every now and again you won't have much choice but to hide. Hide and pray that the monsters nearby won't find you. Yes, of course there are monsters! Hailing from the grotesque realm of whatever's corrupting Darkwater Island, there's a specific way to eliminate each creature, and none of them involve firing a shotgun into their face: you'll have to use your wits to destroy them.

Look at these shambling horrors for too long and your sanity meter will suffer. Instead of health, this gauge measures how insane you've become, depending solely on how much horror you witness. See too much and it's game over. Mind you, insanity does have its benefits… The closer you get to the lower end of the meter, the more able you are to see the truth of what's going on: in the world of Call of Cthulhu, madness lets you see past the mortal realm. Special dialogue options will pop up, letting you get right to the black, beating heart of the matter without bothering with all that interrogation nonsense.

Even if your investigating skills make Sherlock Holmes whimper and your sanity meter becomes low enough to see straight past every lie, don't get cocky. There are some things that are out of your control. Each level will confront you with a set of phobias that will make certain tasks more difficult, such as claustrophobia, which will make your sanity meter shrink after spending too long hiding in small spaces.

Lurking somewhere on Darkwater Island is the answer to exactly what's been going on. It's down to you to shed some light on the terrors that lurk in the shadows and then retreat rapidly in the opposite direction and try to forget what they looked like. Some things are better off left in the dark… ■ ***Zoe Delahunty-Light***

Darkwater Island's inhabitants don't take kindly to strangers, so watch your tongue around them. Buying them drinks helps.

GM Instant Reaction

+ Cyanide have nailed the atmosphere – Darkwater Island exudes Lovecraftian menace from every corner.

– The dialogue needs work – as it is, the game is full of iffy lines performed woodenly, which diminishes the horror.

THRILL-💀-METER

A murder-mystery with a heavy heaping of occult horror.

Multiple endings are in store, though we imagine none of them are pleasant. We'll hazard a guess that your options will be go insane, die horribly, or go insane and then die horribly…



Rats are driven back with light, but a flaming torch isn't the only method of casting it. Look out for guards with lanterns to smash.

Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Asobo Studios **ETA** Spring 2019

A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE

The damned rats will rule all

Last year we were treated to an early look at A Plague Tale: Innocence, the harrowing new stealth-puzzle game from Asobo Studio and Focus Home Interactive. The technical demonstration presented to us was limited but undoubtedly ambitious, a breath of fresh air drawn in a game world tinged with death and decay. And yet, in spite of its promise, the question remained as to how the studio could take this concept and transform it into a full game experience. As we have since discovered, a lot can change in a year.

A Plague Tale sank its claws deeply into our skin almost immediately first time round. It was easy to get drawn into it, with its atmospheric world and exciting premise, driven by stunning technology but with a fragile, all-too human relationship at its core. It was an impressive reveal, though back then we weren't sure whether the studio would be able to carry the mood, themes and simplistic puzzle design across a full adventure. That question has been gnawing at us for months now and, thankfully, it's something the studio is quick to address.

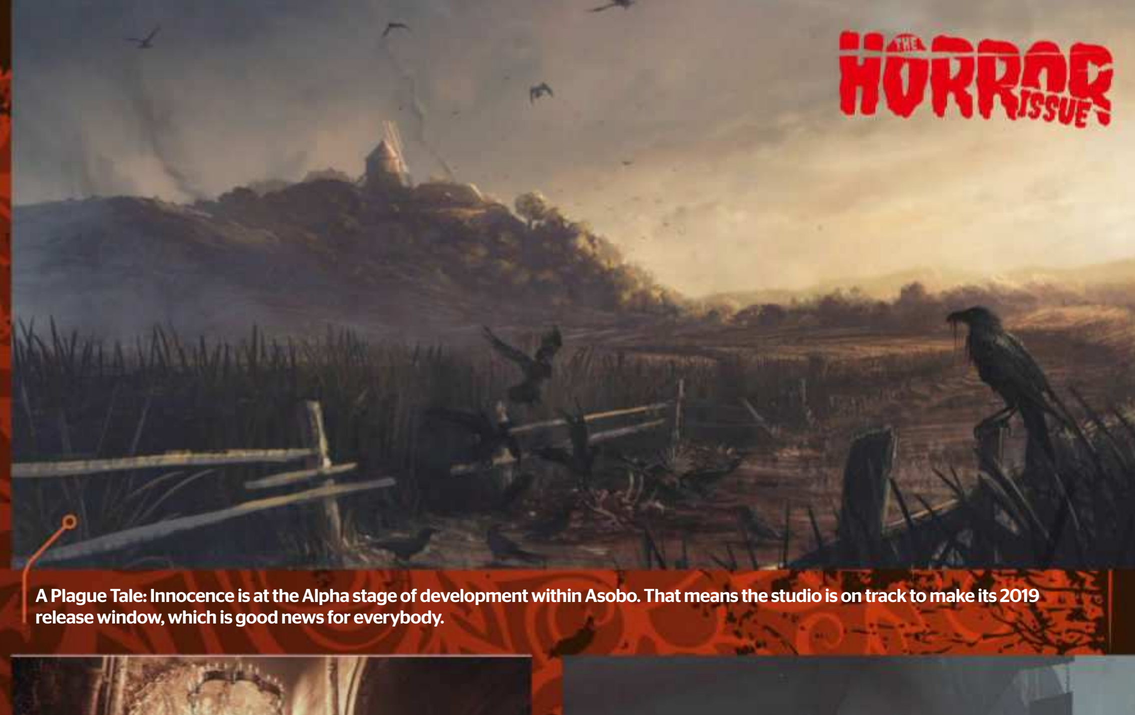
"The goal this year was to show something completely different," explains Davide Dedeine, chief creative officer and co-founder of Asobo. "Last year we faced many questions about the game. Whether it always takes place at night, and whether it would always take place within a church," he says, trailing off as he outlines a litany of questions the press and community raised this time last year, questions that the studio simply wasn't ready to tackle head on. That was then, and this was now. "The answer to them all was 'of course not!' but that's one of the reasons we are showing what we are today."

60% COMPLETE

Survival instinct

What we're seeing today is expressive and haunting, cast across a setting more varied and open than the claustrophobic streets and decidedly gothic interiors we caught but a fleeting glimpse of last time around. What hasn't changed, however, is the focus. A Plague Tale is an emotional adventure seemingly walking a line between The Last Of Us and Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons, embracing the fractured relationship that drove the former and the intimate puzzle-solving and pacing of the latter, with A Plague Tale's swarms of rats doing their best to mask the inevitable comparisons and set it apart from the pack.





A Plague Tale: Innocence is at the Alpha stage of development within Asobo. That means the studio is on track to make its 2019 release window, which is good news for everybody.



Built using the studio's own engine, the game looks absolutely stunning. The fluid rat swarms are particularly impressive.



Asobo estimates that it will take between 10 and 12 hours to play through A Plague Tale: Innocence from start to finish.

"The emotional journey is what fuels the game. The rats are the cool thing, right? The idea that makes the moment-to-moment gameplay interesting, but really it's all about that emotional journey of Amicia and Hugo, and the way [their relationship] evolves from the beginning of the story to the end," says Dedeine, who is eager to impress upon us the importance of the two starring characters – siblings who are caught in a desperate struggle for survival in 14th century France.

Amicia is attempting to steer her younger brother, Hugo, to a hidden sanctuary in an effort to treat a rare blood condition that has affected him since birth. She's willing to risk it all to ensure that they both survive, pursued by the Inquisition that forced them from their home inside the castle walls, and the swarms of rats consuming all. Hugo is merely happy to see the wider world for the first time, his childlike wonder adding levity to a place with very little to spare.

Damned rats

Every step through A Plague Tale's world feels fraught with danger. It carries an oppressive atmosphere that makes death feel like a real inevitability – as if it's waiting for you to make a mistake in the face of insurmountable odds. "We need you to feel weak," adds Dedeine. "You have to find your own way; you have to be smart in this universe to survive."

The rats cover everything. Thousands of them move across the ground like water, with light funnelling them fluidly from one location to the next. They are eager to feed – and they aren't too fussy.

Manipulating light is at the core of the puzzle design. Amicia can hunt for materials to craft torches that provide the pair with temporary sanctuary, for example, or she can use a sling to interact with items such as oil lanterns. One recurring tactic we see is to smash lanterns held by guards – the rats are quick to swarm as soon as the light fades. This can create a path for you, or the screams will provide a distraction to sneak by other nearby guards unnoticed. It's as unpleasant as it is thrilling, as grotesque and enticing to see in the flesh as it sounds on paper, and we cannot wait to play it for ourselves. ■ *Josh West*

"EVERY STEP THROUGH A PLAGUE TALE'S WORLD FEELS FRAUGHT WITH DANGER. IT CARRIES AN OPPRESSIVE ATMOSPHERE"

GM Instant Reaction

+ It looks stunning and is driven by some incredible technology. We can't wait to see how this one develops.

– We're concerned it might get a little samey, with the same basic puzzle mechanics reused over and over to progress.

THRILL-METER



We've never been more thrilled to be surrounded by rats.



Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive
Developer Dontnod **ETA** 5 June

VAMPYR

Exposed to the light

Something ain't right with Vampyr. We've been following this thing for *three years*. That's a long time to see whether this passion project from Dontnod Entertainment would lean more heavily on the studio's inherent strength in storytelling, or demonstrate its capacity for developing one excellent core idea while failing to build a sustainable game world around it.

As it turns out, Vampyr offers the worst of both worlds. The game feels like it's caught between its concept and the realities of modern game design. Its reliance on throwing you between button-bashy combat situations completely fails to properly align with the complex, dramatic and non-linear narrative the studio is trying to paint across a gothic London canvas.

That isn't to say it doesn't have promise, and there's always a chance that the time we spend with the game's opening hours represent a slow-burn introduction before we get to all the complicated good stuff - the moral quandaries that will no doubt stem from being forced to choose between an all-important ability upgrade or leaving the throat of Billy, the plucky street-sweeping urchin who said a bright 'good morning!' to us that cold winter's day, un-torn-open.

"I would say it will be the dilemma of choosing to kill or spare a citizen that is

90% COMPLETE

Vampyr tackles its open narrative in a surprisingly linear fashion. While there is plenty to be interested by in the game, it seems conflicted at its core.

When vampire hunters attack, you use your supernatural, vampiric abilities to take them down.

kind of unique in Vampyr – the fact that you have to think about killing," considers narrative director Stéphane Beauverger as we ask what he believes will set Vampyr apart from the rest of the action-RPG games coming in 2018. "We wanted the player to feel guilt when taking a life."

He isn't wrong. This aspect of Vampyr is certainly interesting, and could provide a unique experience were it executed appropriately. This is a vampire game in which you aren't driven by your desires to feast on flesh, haunt the shadows, or wear Vantablack eye shadow – instead, you are consumed by these desires.

Split personality

Choice and consequence are supposed to be at the heart of Vampyr. Deep RPG systems outline your ability paths and upgrade opportunities, covering everything from supernatural vampiric powers to core weapons, all of it unlocked in exchange for the blood you slurp from an array of personable citizens you can come to know and love while moonlighting as a doctor in a local hospital.

Unsurprisingly, Vampyr treats the citizens with quest markers above their heads differently from the vampire hunters who are charged with protecting them. You'll move from one uneasy interaction, sizing up a potential victim as they wax lyrical about how much they love their kids and how much they hate living in the miserable, plague-ridden, vampire-infested streets of London – the social web of potential interaction and feeding opportunities unfolding in front of you – before throwing you in front of some basic henchmen you'll slash, swipe and bite your way through without any moral recompense or difficulty.

"Our colleagues did some research and, when asking a player whether they like to play the good or the bad guy, 80 per cent of the players prefer to be the good guy," says Beauverger, which is something that, quite honestly, surprised us. "It means that there is a moral compass in everyone; to take a life in a videogame, not in a fighting situation but in cold blood, when it is calculated, it is much more difficult. To push the player to go in this uneasy moral situation I think it will be one of the most important aspects of the game."

You can see echoes of this in Vampyr, of how excellently this could work. But the game's failure to make any real distinction – or to give you the opportunity to make one for yourself – between named citizens and the nameless hordes cast out in combat situations is a real detriment to the immersion of the world and story. It also doesn't help matters that combat is shallow, a button-bashing affair that's as finicky to wield as it is unengaging to employ. Given the option, we would avoid it at all costs and try our hand at being a friendly vampire – like the ones in Hotel Transylvania – but sadly that's never really a viable alternative.

Conflict is at the heart of Vampyr, but it's a shame that it must manifest itself as combat. It's a game divided, with a tension between its main conceit and the gameplay experience being offered to the player. There's a chance that Vampyr will shake the curse of its internal dichotomy as the game begins to open up and further reveal itself, but from what we've played the shallow combat, complex RPG systems, and hyper-interesting social narrative elements are all at odds with one another – and this threatens to sink what is an otherwise compelling concept.

■ ***Josh West***

"CONFLICT IS AT THE HEART OF VAMPYR; IT'S JUST A SHAME IT MANIFESTS ITSELF AS COMBAT"

GM Instant Reaction

+ An interesting premise and awesome visual style certainly has us hooked. There's little else like it.

– Combat is uninteresting and disappointing, while the premise seems to have some pretty glaring holes in it.

THRILL-METER



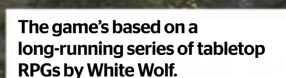
Could do with some more time in the ground before re-emerging



Combat is surprisingly shallow, offering very little in the way of tactile feedback or challenge barriers. We're unfortunately reminded of Remember Me's bouts.



Dontnod has proven it can create interesting, impactful moral choices with Life Is Strange.


The game's based on a long-running series of tabletop RPGs by White Wolf.


Format PC, PS4, XO **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive
Developer Cyanide **ETA** Winter 2019

WEREWOLF: THE APOCALYPSE

It's a dog-eat-dog world



Humans haven't really treated the Earth nicely. Pollution, deforestation – you name it, werewolves have had enough of it. Werewolf: The Apocalypse is an action-RPG that's centred around using the power of the monster inside to bring balance back into the world, which just so happens to involve ripping up a ton of bad guys.

You won't just be roaming around the world of Werewolf: The Apocalypse as a bipedal wolf, though. There's three forms for you to use to make humankind and the evil entity called the Wyrm sorry. Up for grabs is ordinary wolf form – perfect for sneaking. Next you have the usual human one, which lets you use tech, talk to people, and not get thrown out of fancy restaurants. Then when things get hectic it's time to unleash the beast and rip apart anything in your way in your bloodthirsty half-man, half-beast form.

We're wolves

Key to Werewolf is the rage system. As you find out more about how the agents of the Wyrm have been mistreating the planet, your rage meter fills. Once it gets full you'll spontaneously turn into a monster, and go berserk, potentially triggering a Frenzy if you get atoo enthusiastic. When in Frenzy mode you'll be stronger and faster – but are going to have to end it quickly or run the risk of being Touched By The Wyrm, triggering a game over.

To end this state, everyone has to die, including any allies you have nearby. Ouch. In Werewolf: The Apocalypse your bite is way worse than your bark – and you'll need to use all that fury to take down the Wyrm.

Zoe Delahunty-Light

20% COMPLETE



GM Instant Reaction

+ Having three forms means you can tackle fights however you want – stealthily, with gadgets, or with ultraviolence.

– It's going to be tricky to make turning from one form to another seamless, especially with spontaneous transformations.

THRILL-METER



A promising new RPG with the weight of tabletop history behind it.

The game is episodic, with the first entry out now. Four more are to come over the course of the year.

Format PC, PS4, XO **Developer** Cyanide Studios **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **ETA** March

THE COUNCIL

War of the words

Picking the right option in a dialogue sequence can be like spinning a roulette wheel. Will your opponent storm off, or smile benevolently? The Council, the new episodic-narrative game from Cyanide, takes the guesswork out of your conversations and turns talking to characters into a deadly game of strategy.

Bad things always go down on private islands. Especially when it's owned by a mysterious millionaire who can summon the most powerful people on the planet to his domicile - Napoleon Bonaparte, George Washington - you get the idea. As Louis de Richet, an investigator on the search for his razor-sharp mother, you've got to interrogate these well-known figures to find out just where she's disappeared to.

The Council's Social Influence system lends a helping hand. First choose which branch to specialise in - Diplomat, Occultist, or Detective - each of which has its very own skill tree. Gather up all those juicy character points and you can develop various skills, from better lockpicking to your chances of intimidating a susceptible character.

95% COMPLETE

So far, so predictable. Your targets – er, we mean, fellow guests - won't necessarily bend to your will, even with all those skills. Each character has their own immunities: some won't respond to intimidation, for example. However, they have their vulnerabilities you can play on as well, with certain notable figures grovelling in the face of humiliation or flattery.

Bad council

Every now and again you'll get an Opportunity, a window maybe three seconds long to spot something suspicious about your opponent. It could be an averted gaze, a mysterious necklace, or a telling scar. Make the wrong move at certain points in the story, though, and you'll regret it.

During your playthrough you can develop scars that'll permanently affect how characters respond to you. This can seriously change the amount of information you can be privvy to, giving you extra reason to be wary of any violent confrontations.

If it pulls it off, The Council could completely reinvent episodic-narrative games with its strategic slant. Just don't apply those calculating Social Influence principles to real life, okay? ■ ***Zoe Delahunty-Light***

GM Instant Reaction

+ Having vulnerabilities and immunities for each character is an exciting new idea for the episodic-narrative genre.

– Some of the voice acting is atrocious and breaks the atmosphere - not great for a story-driven game.

THRILL-METER





Turns talking into a game of tactics where your choices are permanent



Talking isn't the only way to get clues: pick locks and read documents to find valuable information. Just try to stay out of trouble...

Format PC **Publisher** Crytek **Developer** Crytek **ETA** 22 Feb 2019

HUNT: SHOWDOWN

100 black coffins for 100 bad men (and monsters)

The Old West. A brutal frontier where the meanest son of a gun reigned supreme, and justice was just another word in the dictionary. How could this godforsaken chapter in history possibly be made more inhospitable and violent? Simple really: throw in a load of horrible gribbly monsters.

Hunt: Showdown has had an interesting development history. Originally planned as a Darksiders tie-in developed by Vigil Games, the property got shipped over to Crytek after THQ went kaput. Not much was heard about Hunt until May last year, when it was re-revealed as an Old West horror, co-op, PvP... thing. And now it's out in Steam Early Access.

Clue grit

Hunt is basically like someone stuck PUBG, Red Dead Redemption, and Evolve in a blender. You and a co-op buddy are dropped into a fetid backwoods swamp and tasked with hunting down a hideous boss monster – the only problem being that there are several other teams of enterprising yokels on the same map, hunting the same target. Your first task is to narrow down the search by finding glowing clues dotted around the swamp's many ruined habitations,

"THE GAMEPLAY ITSELF IS DEFINITELY GOING TO BE A MARMITE SITUATION, AND IT NEEDS SOME SERIOUS BALANCING"

70% COMPLETE

The backwoods swamp of Hunt: Showdown manages to be both gorgeous and sinister at the same time.

Your hunter has Darksight, a supernatural vision mode that helps you find clues and bounties.

which are potentially full of zombies, hellhounds, and other gribbly monsters.

Find three clues, and the map shows you right where the monster is hiding. Once the big guy is felled, it needs to be banished, requiring your team to defend the corpse until the timer is up. After all that, all that's left is to claim your bounty and escape the map! Or you could just wait for someone else to do all that, kill them and steal their well-earned prize. Based on your performance you earn money and XP. Money is used to hire and outfit your hunter, and XP goes towards unlocking new abilities and improving your hunter's skills (as long as he stays alive, that is).

The good, the bad...

Hunt: Showdown is an intriguing experience already, but often a frustrating one. The presentation really is exceptional. The environments feel alive, with flora and fauna that reacts realistically to your presence. The sound design is excellent, contributing to the satisfying gunplay, creepy environments, and gross monstrosities. Having said that, the game is currently riddled with technical issues. It looks great, but runs poorly even on high-end PCs.

Matchmaking is pretty slow too, and it can take five to ten minutes to get into a game. Given that it only takes a couple of hits to put you out of the match, sometimes you'll be spending more time staring at loading screens than playing.

The gameplay itself is definitely going to be a Marmite situation, and it needs some serious balancing. Managing to flawlessly find the clues, kill the monster, and claim the bounty is going to be a rare occurrence – most likely you'll be shot in the back first. This is all the more frustrating as the game doesn't hand out much money for anything but winning, and you need money to hire new hunters after you lose. Pretty soon you'll be stuck hiring the cheapest, worst hunters, and your chances of succeeding drop further. On paper, Hunt: Showdown is a winner. Amazing presentation, a great premise, and unique gameplay. In practice it's currently a sluggish, frustrating experience. If and when the problems are ironed out, it has the potential to be a real classic. ■ ***Laurence Phillips***



GM Instant Reaction

+ The game's presentation is great. You can almost smell the rotting flesh and noxious swamp gas.

– Technical and gameplay issues can make the experience frustrating and even boring at times.

THRILL-METER



Could be a truly special multiplayer experience, with some work.



The system of hiring replacement hunters is interesting, but there currently isn't as much difference between your options as we'd like to see.

Spiders, Zombies, and Hellhounds, Oh My!

Zombies



Mostly just a nuisance, these rotting locals will come for any hunter that comes into range. They're quickly dispatched by a headshot, but use your knife – other hunters can hear your shots.

Hellhounds



Mangy, vicious, and foaming at the mouth, these are some of the more dangerous enemies. They're fast, they're hard to hit, and they're loud. Pick them off at a distance with a rifle, it's worth the risk!

The Spider



One of two currently available boss monsters, the Spider is nimble and deadly. It attacks by spitting clouds of poisonous gas and perforating hunters with its claws and fangs, then scuttles away.

The Butcher



The second boss monster. A big, fat, mean SOB. The Butcher goes straight for you, swinging his rusty hook and laughing off bullets. He's immune to fire too, so no trying the old Left 4 Dead Tank trick.



Format PS4 **Pub** Sony
Dev SIE Bend Studio **ETA** Autumn

DAYS GONE

Not so easy rider

Sons Of Anarchy meets The Walking Dead is absolutely the elevator pitch for this upcoming Sony exclusive and… sure, why the heck not?

Open-world survival is the name of the game as you step into the shoes of Deacon St John, a former bounty hunter and all-purpose drifter. This probably makes him well suited for the zombie apocalypse – though Days Gone calls the undead 'Freakers' because 'zombie' is just so last century. Utilising stealth and crafting weapons are a must to make it through, but you will also have to keep an eye on the weather and time of day, as both affect the strength and speed of the undead. They'll be slower and dopier in sunlight, for instance, and with hundreds on screen at a time, you'll want every advantage you can get. If Days Gone can make the most of its open world to give us a less predictable zombie sandbox, then this could be a hell of a ride. ■

GM Instant Reaction
THRILL-METER



Promising, though not super original.



Guitar Hero-style minigame: totally confirmed.

40% COMPLETE

Format PS4 **Publisher** Naughty Dog **Developer** Sony **ETA** Winter 2019

THE LAST OF US PART II

Furry road

The Last of Us was a special kind of game, a post-apocalyptic story with zombies but really the tale of two flawed people learning just what they can and can't live without. Being beautiful and dark in equal measure, with fully realised characters, made its moments of horror (such as being trapped in a sewer full of screaming nasties) all the more authentic.

Making a sequel to one of the most highly regarded games of all time… that's a tough one. Naughty Dog certainly has the pedigree for it, though, and is living up to its name with a recent social media tease. Creative director Neil Druckmann tweeted a picture of a dog in a motion capture suit, captioned "#YearOfTheDog", hinting that The Last Of Us Part II may feature a doggy companion.

It could of course simply be an incidental NPC, but there's every reason to believe, given the presence of horses in the original, that The Last of Us Part II may give us (wo)man's best friend. Here's hoping this good boy doesn't get killed off and make us cry.

Beyond that hint, even though we're hounding Sony for the latest details, little new information has come out. An older Ellie is still pitched as the main character, though some footage suggests another playable character, an unnamed woman (a flashback sequence with Ellie's mum perhaps?) will also be present. Expectations are high – hopefully pleasant (but totally bleak) surprises await. ■

GM Instant Reaction
THRILL-METER



We already love this dog.



Format XO, PC **Pub** Microsoft
Dev Undead Labs **ETA** Autumn

STATE OF DECAY 2

This sequel to 2013's open-world zombie title aims to deliver the same premise but with more polish and features. Chief among them is the inclusion of co-op, with up to three other players. The end of the world is always better with friends, isn't it? You'll be searching for survivors out in the world to populate your ever-improving base, all while taking on more challenging zombies and situations. Given the promise of the original, there's definitely reason to be excited over the prospect of a much-improved sequel. ■



Format PS4, XO, PC **Pub** Focus
Dev Deck13 **ETA** Summer 2019

THE SURGE 2

Deck13 is once again aiming to recreate that magic Dark Souls formula, this time with a follow-up to grim, cyborg-filled sci-fi hack-and-slash title The Surge. Expect to see an expansion of the limb-targeting system and plenty of additional abilities, weapons and implants for your exoskeleton-wearing warrior. Reception for the original was a little mixed – not helped by inevitable comparisons to its revered inspirations. We're hoping this sequel can file down all the first game's rough edges, and expand on the things that made it unique. ■



Format PS4, XO, PC **Pub** Focus
Dev Vostok Games **ETA** Winter

FEAR THE WOLVES

From a team of ex-STALKER developers comes a new battle royale title that leans on that same haunted, eastern European landscape. They won't just be fighting each other either – mixing things up will be mutant creatures and environmental anomalies. Dynamic weather and a day/night cycle will keep players on their toes, too, while they're hunting for protective gear to explore hazardous areas containing special rewards. The battle royale genre is already getting crowded, but a strong atmosphere could make this title a stand out. ■



Format PS4, XO, PC **Pub** Starbreeze
Dev Overkill Studios **ETA** Autumn

OVERKILL'S THE WALKING DEAD

With the latest footage of this long in development title showing a miserable office worker learning to embrace the apocalypse in spite of its dangers, this seems to have a bit less of a sombre attitude than the many other adaptations of The Walking Dead. It's shaping up to be a cooperative first-person shooter that adds a combination of RPG and stealth gameplay on top – with the developer's background working on the hugely successful Payday series, there's reason to be excited. ■

THE 5 SCARIEST GAMES OF ALL TIME!



5

Format GC, PC **Pub** Capcom
Dev Capcom

RESIDENT EVIL REMAKE

Resident Evil is as lauded a series as there is in games. Great instalments such as Resident Evil 4 reshaped the action landscape, and the recent Resident Evil 7 was an impressive reinvention. But no entry has been more terrifying than this GameCube remake of the 1996 PS1 original mansion-based zombie-fest (recently re-released on PC). It uses a fixed camera to build tension - corners you can't see round, reflections in mirrors, and other techniques generated scares still novel today. ■



4

Format PS4, PC **Pub** Frictional Games
Dev Frictional Games

AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT

At a time when horror had been forced back into the shadows, with blockbuster shooters taking centre stage, Amnesia: The Dark Descent managed to revitalise interest in the genre while showing a whole new way to tackle it. You had no weapons, no ways to fight back. Creating obstacles to slow down your opponents, or just plain hiding, was the best you could do against the horrors lurking in the game's depths. It was rough around the edges, but its atmosphere was so thick you could spread it on toast. ■

3

Format PS2, PC **Pub** Konami
Dev Konami

SILENT HILL 2

Like Resident Evil, Silent Hill is a series both acclaimed and adored, with incredible atmosphere-building and a knack for truly surreal monsters. It's the second instalment that really got under the skin. The jumps scares and spooky fog that hung over every outdoor location wer extremely effective, but they were nothing next to the uneasy realisation that your character, James Sunderland, was intricately tied into the horrors around him. The chilling discovery that perhaps he deserved what was happening to him is one that never leaves you. ■

2

Format PS4, XO, PC **Pub** Sega
Dev Creative Assembly

ALIEN: ISOLATION

The Alien may have been in numerous games before, but it wasn't until this riff on the original film that its horror was truly captured. Trapped aboard a crumbling space station with the monster stalking the halls, Isolation wasn't just unbearably tense, it was unpredictable. With no way to kill the creature, your best weapon was the motion tracker. The more rapid those beeps, the faster your heartbeat, and you better not have had it out when the beast was really close in case it heard... ■





Format PS4 **Pub** Konami
Dev Konami

PT

From creator Hideo Kojima came this stand-alone 'teaser' to promote the now cancelled Silent Hills. We may never know just what was in store for that revival of the series, but PT stands alone as a tremendous piece of game horror in its own right. You woke in an empty suburban house. You could only walk through a short corridor. At the end you entered a door and returned to the start of the hallway, but each time, it... changed. Simple but effective thanks to sharp sound and visuals which turned a seemingly normal home into the vessel for something monstrously unsettling. ■



See p42 for details



The tabletop game has been a fan favourite since its original release back in 1995.

The dilapidated industrial environs of the Underhive are filled with hiding spots and high walkways.



Format PS4, XO, PC Publisher Focus Home Interactive Developer Rogue Factor ETA Winter

NECROMUNDA: UNDERHIVE WARS

Getting confrontational in the underbelly of the Warhammer 40,000 universe



Necromunda is among the more evocative settings of the Warhammer 40,000 universe. It's a ruined, poisonous planet dotted with vertiginous towers called Hive Cities, where the rich live high above the toxic clouds while criminals and scum battle for territory deep underground in the Underhive; a place patrolled by gangs of razor-mohawked punks and psychopaths armed with decaying weaponry.

Based on a recent reboot of the tabletop game, Necromunda: Underhive Wars is a turn-based strategy game where you pick a side in this endless war over crumbling diamond-plate walkways and groaning blast furnaces. So far, we've only seen House Goliath (hulking rustpunks) and House Escher (women-only rustpunks), but more of the tabletop game's six Houses will enter the fray soon.

Hive and seek

In the multiplayer-gameplay demo we're shown, two devs kit out their teams, starting with the classes. You get your classic Brawler and Heavy types, but there's also the Deadeye (Sniper), and the Saboteur, who lays traps and can sabotage interactive elements on the map. You can customise each character, from individual shoulder pads to their agility and physical strength, which changes the character's bulkiness.

When you're done dressing your brutes for the big occasion, you go to a deployment screen where you can choose your squad's starting positions and get a feel for relevant objects in the environment – health stations, explosive barrels, and ziplines, which demonstrate the impressive verticality of the maps. Just like in the tabletop game, arenas are four to five

"IT'S STILL TACTICAL, OF COURSE, BUT NOW WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF SPLIT-SECOND DECISIONS"



storeys high, a drastic shake-up from the more sprawling design of similar games. Rogue Factor has introduced a new 'confrontation' system which lets both teams move their squads around in real-time simultaneously, and force confrontations as soon as they come into attacking range. This can lead to some intense encounters. We see a Brawler and Deadeye literally run into each other around a corner, causing both players' Space bars to clang at the same time as they scramble to initiate the confrontation. Another time, a Deadeye on a high platform catches sight of some beefy punk running for a medical station, and cruelly forces a confrontation just before they reach it.

Till perma-death do us part

To accommodate this more pacey approach, activation order has been unlocked, allowing for more on-the-fly decision-making in response to your enemy's moves. If you see a running enemy about to cross the line of sight of your squadmate, you can quickly switch to them to try and start a confrontation. It's still tactical, of course, but now with the possibility of split-second decisions.

It's already clear that Rogue Factor is well versed in the ways of the tabletop game. The fact that it's decided to keep in that most insufferable of features – bloody *gun jams* – is testament to that. At a glance, the environments and character models could be a bit more gritty and exaggerated, but there's plenty of time to work on the still-raw aesthetics. The basic mechanics are sound, and the hybrid real-time confrontation system is an interesting move, though really we'd need to spend some hours with it to get a proper feel.

If the studio's previous game Mordheim is anything to go by, the real meat here will be the single-player campaign, which will hopefully feature unique stories for each faction. We can't wait to see what kinds of savage tales Rogue Factor comes up with for this underbelly of the Warhammer 40k universe. Perma-death of characters is a given, but just as important is how Necromunda plays out between missions. This game relies on the bonds that you build with characters over a campaign, and the stories that arise as they pick up wounds, fight heroically, and watch their comrades fall. ■ ***Robert Zak***

GM Instant Reaction

+ With its high arenas and jamming guns, Necromunda is staying true to the spirit of the gritty-yet-vibrant tabletop game.

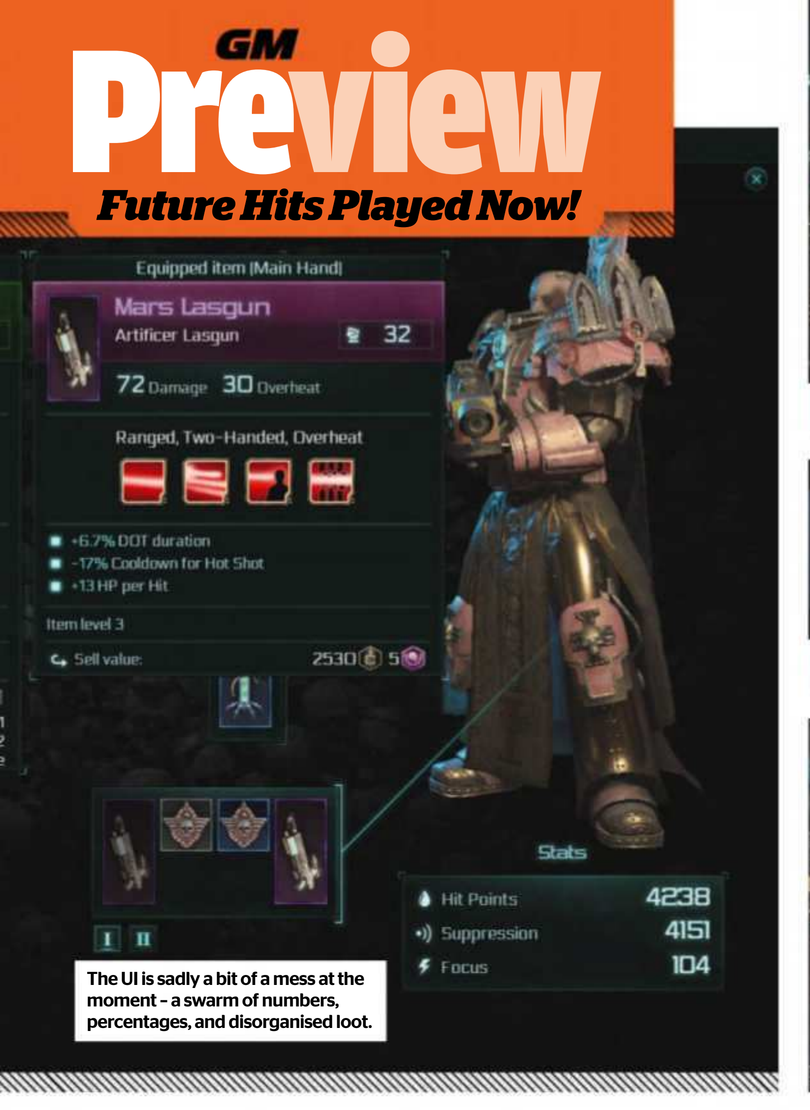
– Character models look fine, but they could look more extreme, more grotesque, like that classic Necromunda box art.

THRILL-O-METER

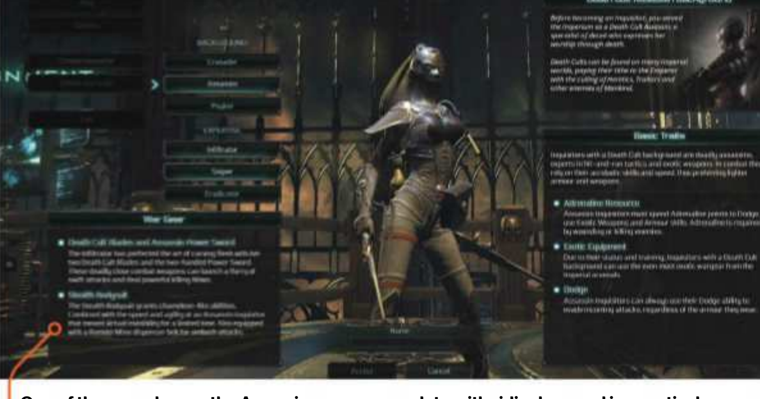
1 2 3 **4** 5

The board is set, now we just need more details about the campaign.

Each gang has its own aesthetic and combat style. House Goliath's warriors are huge, beefy blokes, strong and tough but a little dim-witted. The all-female House Escher is rather more agile and elegant.



The UI is sadly a bit of a mess at the moment – a swarm of numbers, percentages, and disorganised loot.



One of the core classes, the Assassin, comes complete with ridiculous and impractical dominatrix armour! True to the source material, at least...



Free lootboxes are a fun diversion, but will they stay free forever?







Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Neocore Games **Developer** Neocore Games **ETA** Summer

WARHAMMER 40,000: INQUISITOR – MARTYR



In the grim darkness of the far future, people are a bit peeved

Do you think anyone just has a cup of tea and a slice of cake in the 41st millennium? If they do, there's no evidence of it here – it's all murder, all the time.

Inquisitor – Martyr is a Diablo-esque action-RPG, out now in Early Access, in which you play an agent of the Imperial Inquisition, and massacre hordes of cultists, demons, and corrupted Space Marines as part of your day job. The core gameplay will be instantly recognisable to anyone who's played similar games – it's a by-the-numbers dungeon crawler. Your character has four regular skills and a special skill that requires Focus, a mana-like resource. You gather loot from dead enemies and chests, earn experience, spend skill points, wash, rinse, repeat.

65% complete

Slog of war

Unfortunately, it's not terribly compelling at the moment. Levelling up brings passive percentage buffs and not much else. The UI is frustratingly clunky. Skills are based on the weapon you have equipped, so you don't earn new ones as you level, and they're pretty uniform between weapons so there's no motivation to find new ones. There's no in-game monetisation, but there's a proto-loot box system in place and what looks like a premium currency, so Neocore may be preparing to slot in a real-money economy later. The core game is solid, but we'd recommend waiting for the finished product, rather than picking up this in-progress version. ■ *Laurence Phillips*

GM Instant Reaction

+ The core gameplay and presentation are good. There's the skeleton of an enjoyable game here.

– At the moment it's a bit repetitive and uninspiring. There's not enough depth to keep you playing for long.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

Lots of potential, but it's a way off from being realised.



There's already plenty of variety in the enemies, which range from tiny, impish demons to giant lumbering dreadnoughts.



Nobody looks friendly here but, believe it or not, the death machines with the sinister red eyes are the good guys.

Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive
Developer Cyanide Studio **ETA** Autumn 2018

SPACE HULK: TACTICS

We'll Banner all mention of a certain Marvel hero here

Depending on your perspective, the upsurge in board game adaptations is either very interesting, or extremely weird. Either way, it's no surprise to see the Warhammer universe lead the way, sewn together as it is with the threads of sci-fi and fantasy.

With plenty of games behind it, including a handful of Blood Bowls, Cyanide Studio is now working on an adaptation of Games Workshop favourite Space Hulk. Originally released in 1989, it's not exactly a new board game, but it remains much-loved. Completely unrelated to Full Control's 2013 game Space Hulk, Space Hulk Tactics promises "a unique twist to the classic gameplay of the cult board game".

This turn-based adventure will offer two story-driven campaigns: one where you lead a squad of Blood Angels marines, and one where you get to play the part of the dastardly Genestealers.

Hulk smash

It's the Space Hulk that fans know and love, but Tactics will also employ a card system. An idea you may be familiar with already, this will allow players to customise squads pre-match and activate certain abilities in the heat of battle. This should help keep things fresh in the already-confirmed online multiplayer.

It already sounds very tasty, but that's not everything. Most exciting of all, perhaps, is the inclusion of a map creator. You'll even be able to customise a level's objectives, creating your own bespoke missions and sharing them with the world. Talent not included. ■ ***Luke Kemp***

70% complete

GM Instant Reaction

\+ With lots of lovely violence and tactical thinking, this can easily appeal to non-Warhammer fans. And a map editor? Awesome.

− Whether it *will* have broad appeal is another matter. Too often Warhammer games have no interest in helping the uninitiated.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 **3** 4 5

Done right, this could be the definitive Space Hulk experience.

The actual game looks more digitised than this art shot, but the colour palette still has the amber hues of a Rembrandt painting.

Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Spiders **ETA** Autumn

GREEDFALL

Playing the diplomat on an island where magic and muskets collide

The colonial period, with frigates slicing into the white beaches of unknown lands and first contact made with native tribes, has been explored by plenty of games in a historical context, but rarely reappropriated for a fantasy one. The theme needs to be handled with care, given the history, but the collision of nature versus technology, and the clash of two very different cultures, makes for a fine RPG premise. And this coming from Spiders (Technomancer, Bound By Flame), a studio with a knack for interesting premises (if slightly rough executions), makes this one all the more intriguing.



The action takes place on Teer Fradee, an island that has recently been colonised by a mix of settlers and merchants from an alternate-history Europe, essentially. Some of these colonials are respectful of the islanders' way of life, others not so much, which leads to tensions between the natives and outsiders. Amidst all of this, you, a well-to-do colonist called De Sardet, are searching the island for a cure to a disease that has ravaged the Old Continent.

60% complete

The developers walk us through a small segment of the game, letting us take in its elegant 17th century theme – from the imposing baroque architecture in the merchant city of New Serene, to the rather dashing redingotes and tricorne hats of the colonists. The native islanders, meanwhile, are a druidic, wood-elfy bunch, capable of summoning the energies of nature to their aid.

Serene streets

Our tour begins with a short wander through the gold-hued streets of New Serene, its buildings looming with an air of colonial pomp. Our hero De Sardet bumps into Siora, a woman from the native Red Spears tribe, who requests his help in playing diplomat between the tribe and another colonial power. He obliges, and the two leave the city hub to head off on the mission.

The devs take us through an autumnal forest at the foot of an imposing mountain. De Sardet and Siora sneak around some kind of beastly tree-things, which we're told are Guardians, and giant lizards that are probably the kind of creatures real-life colonists believed to exist in the uncharted New World. Eventually we come to an opening where rival colonists have wiped out a group of natives, giving us a chance to glimpse the combat system.

It's in real-time, and characters have a 'critical gauge' that, when filled, allows them to use a souped-up variant of any of their abilities; a healing spell becomes a group heal, a sword slash becomes a critical hit, and so on. After a scuffle of rapier pokes, wild musket shots, kicks, and a bit of nature magic from Siora, the assailants finally go down, and we're left to decide what to do with their one survivor. With the devs' buzzword 'diplomacy' in our minds, we decide to be merciful and let him live, and the demo comes to an end.

We don't know what knock-on effect our decision might have had, but we're told that there will be six factions in total, and a reputation system tracking your relations with each of them. So our little





Check out that 17th century fashion! The game draws on elements of real European history for the look of the characters and architecture, but is set in its own fantasy universe of monsters and mages.



There will be 16 hub areas in Greedfall, taking you across a range of biomes such as swamps, coastlines, and vast moody plains.





act of mercy here may eventually have surprising consequences. The companions you choose will have an effect on diplomatic relations too, and romance will be available to those who wish to pursue it.

Musket to exploring

What we've seen so far suggests that the hubs are quite linear, with your freedom of movement limited by clear 'natural' barriers like rocky walls, or buildings when you're in the city. In some ways it recalls Dragon Age: Origins, and we're always happy to be reminded of that RPG gem. However, that game's the best part of a decade old, and these days we're more aware of when a game world is funnelling us in a certain direction. In the gameplay demo, the artifice is palpable.

But if what happens within these tight spaces is compelling enough, then that really shouldn't matter. Spiders has quite a few titles under its belt, but it isn't exactly a mega-studio with endless resources, and the scale of what we've seen reflects that. But there's definitely an intrigue to Greedfall's setting, where the muskets of a 17th century empire clash with the magical spells and fantastical creatures of a faraway land. Flesh this out – as Spiders intends – with plenty of meaningful choices, complex characters, and excellent writing, and the island of Teer Fradee could well be worth a visit later this year. ■ ***Robert Zak***

"A HEALING SPELL BECOMES A GROUP HEAL, A SWORD SLASH BECOMES A CRITICAL HIT"

Colonial Inspiration

Jehanne Rousseau, CEO of Spiders, gives a little insight into Greedfall's unique colonial-fantasy setting

"We're tired of the usual medieval, heroic fantasy setting. The 17th century is the great explorers' era, which fits with our emphasis on exploration and diplomatic choices. We're not making a historical game – it's an inspiration and a reference, that's all. We looked at plenty of native tribes' histories all over the world to create our own. We didn't want to address only one country's history, but to create a more universal feeling."

GM Instant Reaction

+ A unique colonial-fantasy setting and oil-painted style make for a fascinating world we want to explore.

– From what we've seen, the world design looks quite restrictive, not really giving off the intended 'exploration' vibe.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 **3** 4 5

Dragon Age: Origins with muskets and tricorne hats? Colour us tentatively intrigued.

Format PC **Publisher** Coffee Stain Publishing
Developer Ghost Ship Games **ETA** Winter

DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

Call Of Rubies: Infinite Dwarfare



What does a dwarf do in space? Same things they do everywhere else: mine, groom their beards, and beat the stuffing out of anyone who dares to get in their way.

It's a simple set-up for this co-op shooter, but it works. Available now in Steam Early Access, it sees you and up to three mates step into the shoes of a team of height-challenged, hirsute space miners and burrow your way into mineral-rich planetoids, pocketing any shiny stuff you find. Environments are procedurally generated and almost completely destructible, allowing you to dig your way through walls and floors with ease.

50% complete

Rock 'n' roll

Each team member has a distinct role to play in exploration – the Engineer can shoot platforms on to surfaces for buddies to hop up, the Scout lights up the dark with his flaregun and grapples to tricky spots, and the Gunner can set up a zipline for easy transportation to higher or lower elevations.

We spend most of our time with the game as the Driller. This irate facial-hair enthusiast *dual-wields electric drills,* making him the team's top digger. It's not long before 'tunnel through it' seems like the only solution to all our problems.

Our enthusiastic excavation soon gets us in trouble, however. Turns out the local wildlife isn't too friendly, and as we tunnel into each new area, we're beset by escalating waves of vicious alien bugs. Each dwarf is well-equipped for combat – from the Engineer's sentry turret to the Gunner's portable minigun – but as enemy numbers grow, each mission transforms from bold exploration to a fighting retreat.

Racing to the extraction point with a rucksack full of space gold and ammo reserves dwindling is brilliantly tense as the seconds tick down and the bugs swarm ever closer. Despite procedurally generated elements each mission has a crafted pace, with just the right mix of quiet exploration and chaotic combat. In other words, we dig it. ■ ***Robin Valentine***







Different planets have different themes – swamp worlds, for example, are full of poisonous bugs and plants.



GM Instant Reaction

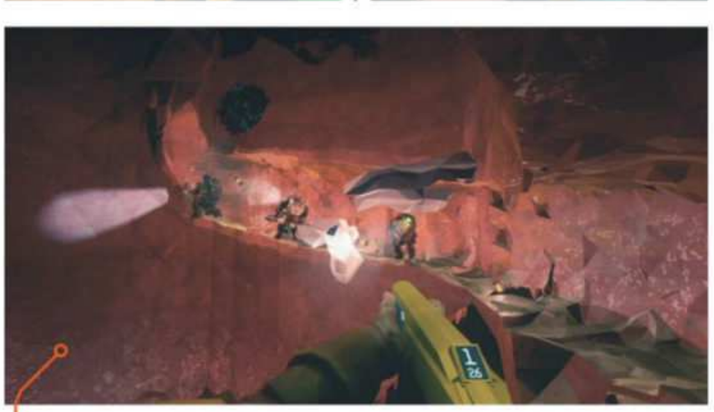
+ A neat twist on the co-op shooter formula, mixing Left 4 Dead's action with Minecraft's exploration.

– Enemies are a little generic, both in how they look and how they behave. Just your standard alien bugs, really.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

Already great fun with friends – updates should make it even better.



Before each game you can customise your loadout and buy new upgrades with cash gained from missions. And, of course, you can choose which beard you want.



Ammo is in short supply, and managing your bullets is crucial to success. Certain minerals you find on the job can be spent to call in supply drops to keep you going.



You arrive in a cute, candy-coloured boat – we assume driven by a motor since its sails are down.



Hippies are everywhere, masking the capitalist machinations that take place beneath the surface. We're sure Presley's exploiting our labour, frankly.





You can speak to wandering NPCs, or spar with them for combat practice.





GM Instant Reaction

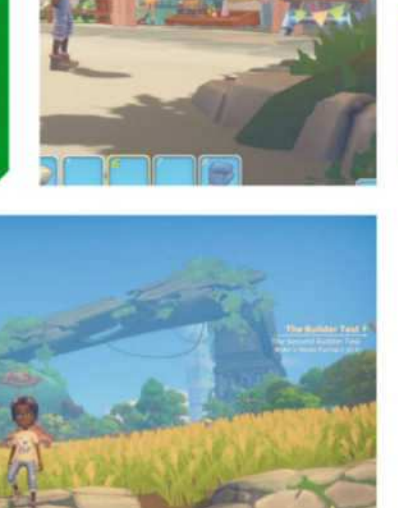
+ Blue skies, green grass and pink llamas are a wonderful escape from grim space marines and ammo counters.

– The tyranny of a working life is never far away, with jobs always needing to be done and new levels to be attained.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 **3** 4 5

A good looking craft 'em up out to take on Crossings and Valleys.



Futuristic, lootable, ruins interspersed with low-tech rural buildings such as windmills and cottages give a refreshingly quirky look to the town.

Format Switch, PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Team17
Developer Pathea Games **ETA** Autumn

MY TIME AT PORTIA

He cuts down trees, he eats his lunch, he lives in a corporatocracy…



With a name reminiscent of an agreeable BBC Two travelogue, you might expect My Time At Portia to be a game of sunny skies, gently waving corn, and impossibly cute lambs. And it is. Released into Steam Early Access, the dev is looking for feedback for balancing before the full launch.

60% complete

But the game is also a suburban hell where you're conscripted into work the second you land on its shores by Presley, a bespectacled businessman who seems to know far too much about you. He also expects you to live in a shack, hastily evacuated by your father who has conveniently gone to the other side of the world. We'll be examining any fresh piles of stones and new patios near Presley's house very carefully.

Graphic hovel

Your hovel has workbenches for crafting, plus holes in the floor to fix, and you'll find raw materials around the town. Early tasks include making an axe, which you can use to chop down small trees but not to murder sheep. Larger trees require better axes, while higher-class loot can be found in the ruins of a previous civilisation, infested with monsters, that you explore with a jetpack and scanner.

There's a levelling and skill point system to go with the crafting, and carrying out actions consumes stamina points, which you replenish by eating and sleeping. With an autumn release date, that balancing work can go on till harvest time. ■ *Ian Evenden*

The visuals are surprisingly attractive considering some of the garish colours involved.

Format PC **Developer** Wonderboy Bobi/Storybird
Publisher Wonderboy Bobi/Storybird **ETA** Summer

AGGELOS

Wonder Boy, what is the secret of your powers?



This 2D platformer/RPG hybrid will look mighty familiar if you know your retro games; it will also bring on a wave of nostalgia. 8-bit visual style? Red snakes? Gold coins and wooden signposts? Yep, it's essentially a new Wonder Boy game. Indeed, Aggelos is so retro, a long-dormant part of us is hoping for a Game Gear port.

Our hands-on with an almost-finished build of the game reveals an adventure very similar to WayForward's Shantae – hardly surprising given Shantae's similarity to the Wonder Boy series' later Monster World games. Unlike Shantae, however, Aggelos shuns HD modernity completely, instead relying on tight controls and equally well-implemented 'Metroidvania' level design across its 8-bit-styled world to hold your attention.

Hero, meet quest

Of course, playing as a mute, pixelated man instead of a sassy, belly-dancing HD heroine may not be the obvious choice, but Aggelos harks back to a much simpler time.

In the opening scenes, you save a princess from a monster, meet her grateful father, then immediately agree to save the entire kingdom from an evil antagonist named Valion. There's not even a 'decline' option – the game knows exactly what you're here for.

The controls feel arcade solid, with weighty, precise jump mechanics, responsive attacks that can be upgraded with better equipment and well-explained special moves with re-watchable tutorials.

80% complete

The elemental abilities you unlock as you beat the game's temples completely change how you view the entire game world. For instance, there's one allowing you to turn enemies into platforms to reach higher ground and explore new places. When the payoff for all this is chests gushing fountains of pixelated gold backed by glittering 8-bit music, all your retro buttons will be pushed.

It remains to be seen just how deep and expansive Aggelos' world is, but what we've seen is very promising. It gets to the point where we even start thinking about making notes as we go with an actual pen, like in the 1980s, the old days where every solution wasn't a click away. Actually... anyone got any graph paper?

■ *Justin Towell*

GM Instant Reaction

+ Tight controls, clever enemy placement, and impressive level design make for an enjoyable retro throwback.

– It's got competition for 'Best Wonder Boy Tribute' – upcoming Monster Boy has the original series' creator on-board.

THRILL-O-METER 1 2 3 4 5 (4)

Won't change the world, but it's good, clean, retro fun.







There is some subtle parallax scrolling, so it's not quite authentic 8-bit. Maybe a 1989 Mega Drive game? Sorry, sorry, too nerdy...



Format PC **Pub** Focus Home Interactive
Dev Tindalos Interactive **ETA** Winter

BATTLEFLEET GOTHIC: ARMADA 2

Do you like big spaceships that look like cathedrals? Well boy do we have the game for you! Though you're probably already a Warhammer 40K fan and thus totally on board with this anyway. It sees loads of classic factions from the tabletop game, 12 at launch, making interstellar war with each other. There are the typical gothic ships of the Space Marines, but players can also take control of the Orks' ramshackle, makeshift vessels, and the Tyranids' giant living spacecraft. ■ *SG*



Format PC **Pub** Snail Games
Dev Snail Games **ETA** Winter

PIXARK

ARK: Survival Evolved was a fun mix of harsh survival mechanics and the joy of encountering loads of dinosaurs. The same team is striving for greater mainstream appeal with PixARK which takes the template of ARK and transports it into a more fantasy-themed, Minecraft-esque world. Blocky and colourful, it looks far more cartoonish and child-friendly than the original game, with energetically animated characters on screen. Whether it can pry away fans from either ARK itself or Minecraft remains to be seen. ■ *SG*



Format PS4, XO **Pub** Square Enix
Dev Square Enix **ETA** Winter

KINGDOM HEARTS III

New footage continues to emerge, giving us hope this sequel might actually, finally come out... The universe-hopping series, which takes players between the worlds of Final Fantasy and Disney, while using characters from both, returns with all-new additions to its roster. Not only will there be adventures in the world of Toy Story, but we've now seen a section taking place in the Monsters Inc universe, where the main cast are transformed into spooky versions of themselves. Goofy's transformation is maybe a little too horrific. ■ *SG*



Format PS4, XO, PC **Pub** FH Interactive
Dev New World Interactive **ETA** Autumn

INSURGENCY SANDSTORM

The game was originally announced with a single-player mode, following a Kurdish woman trying to rescue her sister in Iraq with a band of mercenaries and rebels... but this is now no more. A real shame, because this sounded compelling in a world where military videogames usually revolve around gruff men and special forces. The focus is now squarely on multiplayer, significantly expanded from the tense original. There are bigger maps, and new vehicles players can use to support their team. ■ *SG*



Format PC **Pub** 1C Company
Dev Snowhound Games **ETA** May

DEEP SKY DERELICTS

Derelict, but far from empty



Running around rusty starships in cool, clunky space suits is so much our jam that Deep Sky Derelicts barely needed to do anything other than that. Thankfully, not content to bow to how easily pleased we are, this Steam Early Access title is also a robust RPG with turn-based combat and exploration.

It's very reminiscent of Darkest Dungeon – a comparison that doesn't land very much in its favour, but there's reason to believe it's worth playing in its own right. For a start, there's a more defined narrative and arguably a more interesting world.

Darkest Dungeon leaned heavily on its Lovecraftian inspirations, but Deep Sky Derelicts is very much doing its own thing, even if it is a touch derivative. The combat is a bit more traditional than Darkest Dungeon's position-based fighting, but it makes good use of its sci-fi settings for some fun, and weird, mechanics. ■ *SG*

GM Instant Reaction
THRILL-O-METER 1 2 3 4 5
Turn-based, in space!



It's not the best looking game out there but it sells the experience perfectly

Format PC **Publisher** No More Robots **Developer** RageSquid Games **ETA** Winter

DESCENDERS

Going anywhere but downhill



Sometimes all you need are life's simple pleasures, and what could be simpler and more pleasing than going down a hill on your bike really, really fast? Let us tell you: Descenders, available now in Steam Early Access, does going down hills on your bike exceptionally well.

It's the quality of the presentation that really sells the sheer joy of being on these bikes. Wind rushing past your rider as they bend and bounce to every bump in the track. Or when they crash head-first into the trunk of a tree. The feedback for the player as they careen round a turn is perfect in making you feel every inch of the track. Descenders won't win any awards for best looking game around, but its simple visuals are perfectly chosen to deliver the pure, ideal version of its experience.

Every aspect is utilised to convey the sensation of speed, from animation to on-screen effects. Combine that with simple intuitive controls, easy checkpoints, and a laid-back soundtrack, and the result is thoroughly entertaining. Objectives are straightforward – mastering a new trick, or trying to beat your time – but the pitch-perfect execution makes them brilliantly compelling. And failure is just a quick button-press away from being another go. Deep but understanding, challenging but not punishing. Descenders is fun all the way to the bottom – and updates should make it even better in the run up to launch. ■ ***Sam Greer***

GM Instant Reaction
THRILL-O-METER 1 2 3 4 5
A wheely good time. (Sorry.)





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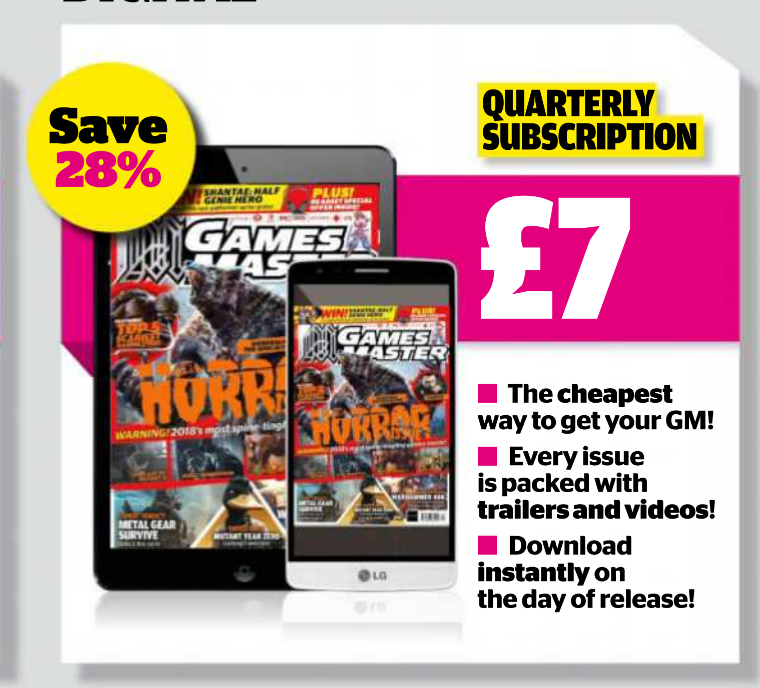
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The studio is incredibly versatile when it comes to its visuals, moving easily between art styles.

ACING IT

How three brothers from Chile created some of the most eye-catching games around

If you're a small game studio today, the aim is to make games that stand out. To catch people's eye you need to make games quite unlike everyone else's. And there isn't a studio out there that's embraced that more strongly than ACE Team.

Established in 2002 and based in Santiago, Chile, the studio owes its name to the three brothers who founded the company; Andrés, Carlos, and Edmundo.

So how did this small studio go from obscurity to fan favourite? "It's been a lifelong thing," Carlos Bordeu tells us. "Because it's been so long since we started games and it gradually went on from being something that was a bit of a hobby to something that was a bit more serious with each project that we made to the point where we were serious about transforming it into a real studio, making real games."

That journey stretches all the way back to the brothers experimenting with their very first computer. "I still remember in our Mac Plus, that's like a 328x200 screen, black and white, we found this program called ResEdit where you'd see the resources that were inside other programs. Sometimes the sprite sheets were available, and you could change them to your own."

Card blanche

It was that early fooling around that lead to their first big project, a total conversion mod for Doom 2 called Batman Doom. "The title was horrible, but basically we changed all the graphics and all the enemies and all the levels. It was an entire game based on Batman. That was in the late '90s. Quake 2 was already coming out and we were still kind of stuck on Doom but that's like, from the perspective of teenage kids fooling around with their home computer here in Chile."

From these mods their ambitions grew until they tackled their first proper videogame project, Zenozoik. Though things didn't go quite as planned: "We spent a year and a half with a very, very small team, it was just us three brothers plus a programmer making a prototype

"WE WERE TRYING TO AVOID THE WHOLE LORD OF THE RINGS, ORCS AND ELVES, MAGICIANS WITH POINTY HATS THING"







Calling card

Unique visuals have become the studio's trademark, with each game looking completely different from the last. The pursuit of interesting art styles has been a major driving force for the developers, who are very visually minded, but strive for just as much novelty with game mechanics. "I would say the two components that are the driving force behind almost all our games tend to be the art and the merger of game mechanics that are not traditionally seen mixed together. You can see it in Zeno Clash. While it has become more normal now to see a first-person game with melee combat, it wasn't so much at the time. The visual style plus the mixing of game mechanics tends to be something we move toward when developing a project."

to see if we could find someone who was interested in funding the project. And to be completely honest, the prototype wasn't that good."

This first attempt proved to be an important lesson in what the team could and couldn't do. From here they discovered their strengths and weaknesses, and approached their next project with those in mind. "The demo of Zenozoik was more ambitious in terms of trying to do a larger world, with different choices on how you were gonna approach problems, and something that was way too ambitious for a small team."

But from the ashes of that project came Zeno Clash. A strange first-person brawler that tells the story of Ghat and his feud with his family and their ward, Father-Mother. The world and characters of the game are wildly diverse. Bird-people fight alongside golems made of ink, wielding makeshift bone weapons. From its narrative to its visuals, Zeno Clash is quite unlike any other game out there.

"The main source of inspiration for Zeno Clash is the art of John Blanche," Carlos explains. "He was an illustrator for White Dwarf magazine. He did this thing he called punk fantasy. We took from that, we also took from things like paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. We were trying to avoid the whole Lord of the Rings, orcs and elves, magicians with pointy hats thing."

Zeno Clash might be strange, but nothing is stranger than ACE Team's talent for making each new game



Zeno Clash is full of characters who all seem like they come from different games, yet the mismatched aesthetic comes together perfectly.


Rock of Ages' Monty Python-aping art style enhances the game's slapstick feel tremendously.





something completely different. The developer followed it up with Rock of Ages, a bizarre Monty Python-esque game in which you smashed through historical periods with a massive boulder.

"Right after we finished Zeno Clash, we were toying around with the idea of doing a second one. Fortunately we didn't go there immediately, because I think it would've been even more difficult. So we were thinking about what if we were gonna do a secondary project, that was smaller, something that was more simple."

The team's penchant for tackling new genres and styles with every release has made for a very special studio, but it's certainly no small feat.

"It's one of our main problems we have to tackle. I would say it's very difficult to move from project to project where everything is new, and you have to throw out all the code you did from the other project because the game is so different so you're not really sharing anything. Even with the sequels, we did them so far apart from each other."

While this approach has its challenges, Ace Team prevails thanks to the experience of its members. "Before, many of us worked at a studio called Wanako Games. And during that time we worked on a lot of small games. We did match-three games, racing games, all sorts of games. We did a game called Tornado Jockey, where you control this tornado and destroy houses. So we've all had a lot of experience working in the game industry on a vast number of genres."

Full house

After Rock of Ages became the studio's most successful title to date, Ace Team decided it was the time to tackle Zeno Clash 2. It's an incredible game in many, many ways but some felt it failed to hold together as strongly as the original.

"It was a single-player, first-person action adventure in an open world, with hundreds of creatures, vast environments and a pretty complex story. It also had multiplayer. We had to do Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 ports simultaneously with the PC version. With a team of 15 people."

Nobody is more critical of their games than Carlos himself. For him, Zeno Clash 2 only fulfilled some of the developer's ambitions. "I think it achieved some things really well, but it fell into the camp where we overstretched the capacity of the studio. Some parts of the game didn't result as well as we would have wanted. So in the end it definitely wasn't a failure, but it wasn't what we were hoping the game would be."

The difficulties on Zeno Clash 2 did little to deter the team from chasing its next project. Abyss Odyssey is a fighting game, platformer and roguelike in which every enemy has its own playable moveset. The world of 1890s Santiago, Chile, is under siege from a sleeping warlock, whose dreams are taking shape in the real world and plunging it into chaos. Players take on the role of Katrien, a part of the warlock's dreams, who is on a quest to end the carnage being inflicted on the world. "We had developed this idea to do a fighting game, sort of mixed with an adventure game with mechanics similar to Smash Bros, we're super big Smash Bros fans. But we wanted to do it in the visual style of an artist, Harry Clarke, who did some paintings for the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. It was super dark and super creepy at the beginning. We ended up changing this a little bit, to move it into something more magical and inviting."

Not all Ace Team's games begin with an art style in mind, and its latest title, The Deadly Tower of Monsters, started from a very simple idea. "We had seen the success of titles like Bastion. The character moves around floating environments where he is supposed to be at an altitude. So we were thinking about how that would work if you designed a game that was similar in terms of a top-down camera but instead of just moving around flat surfaces, you could really move up and down




Abyss Odyssey's art nouveau style made it quite the special fighting game back in 2014.



ART HISTORY

A TIMELINE OF THE STUDIO, FROM THE BEDROOM TO THE WORLD STAGE

1999
BATMAN DOOM IS COMPLETED AND WELL RECEIVED, PUTTING THE BROTHERS AND THEIR AMBITIONS ON THE MAP.

2002
ACE TEAM IS OFFICIALLY FOUNDED, AND WORK ON FIRST PROJECT ZENOZOIK BEGINS.

2004
ANDRÉS AND CARLOS ARE HIRED BY WANAKO GAMES. ACE TEAM GOES ON PAUSE, AND ZENOZOIK IS CANCELLED.

2007
ANDRÉS AND CARLOS LEAVE WANAKO GAMES AND RETURN TO ACE TEAM. WORK BEGINS ON ZENO CLASH.

2009
THE ORIGINAL ZENO CLASH FIGHTS ITS WAY ONTO STEAM, AND EARNS THE STUDIO A DEDICATED FANBASE.

in a massive environment. Originally the idea was a big tower structure. In this case we were still thinking about the game mechanics long before we thought about this cheesy sci-fi, movie style."

Royal flush

Ace Team continues to be restless and is already hard at work on its next project, telling us that it will be announced and released later this year. "We're up to the point in development of this project where it's so near the final stretch that we're already thinking about what we're going to be doing next. I can't say what either of the projects are, but I can say they have nothing to do with each other. I think people will see in each at least one of the components that makes an ACE Team game."

Standing out in a space as crowded and repetitious as videogames is no easy task, but Ace Team continues to make it look effortless. Every new title is a welcome surprise, though tackling something new with each project hasn't been easy. Still, the studio maintains a focused vision with every release. What's the secret?

"Working as brothers it's always been very good for us because we have a level of communication that is difficult to achieve with people who are not your family. And we have very clear ideas that we all share that has helped us progress and move forward together making these strange games." ■ ***Sam Greer***



Rock Of Ages 2 went beyond the Monty Python look and borrowed from artists such as Van Gogh and Dali.







The Deadly Tower of Monsters embraced sci-fi camp with enthusiasm.

2011
ROCK OF AGES BECOMES A SMASH HIT. SALES-WISE, IT'S STILL THE STUDIO'S MOST SUCCESSFUL TITLE TODAY.

2013
THE HIGHLY AMBITIOUS ZENO CLASH 2 RELEASES TO MIXED REVIEWS, BUT DEFINITELY STILL PACKS A PUNCH.

2014
ABYSS ODYSSEY VENTURES FORTH, ASKING PLAYERS TO WORK TOGETHER AS A COMMUNITY TO UNLOCK NEW BOSSES.

2016
SCI-FI B MOVIES AND ACTION-RPGS COME TOGETHER AS THE DEADLY TOWER OF MONSTERS CLIMBS ONTO STEAM.

2017
ROCK OF AGES II: BIGGER & BOULDER ROLLS OUT, BECOMING ACE TEAM'S SECOND MOST SUCCESSFUL GAME YET.

Pulling off long, arcing skids and doughnuts in your car is positively encouraged.

Who is...



Mike Blackney was initially working on Dead Static Drive part-time while teaching. Two years ago he was given an Unreal development grant to help make his game. Now he's moved to full-time development, and has recruited two more staff to get the game finished. He doesn't have a specific deadline, but thinks early next year is a "totally reasonable" timescale. Fingers crossed...

Format PC **Developer** Mike Blackney **ETA** Spring 2019 **Web** bit.ly/gmdeadstatic

#1 DEAD STATIC DRIVE

Giant worms and gas pumps collide in the weirdest road trip you'll ever play



Survival games aren't traditionally known for their comedy. Sure, you might get the odd moment of gallows humour, but generally speaking you're scavenging for supplies in a hostile world, desperately struggling to stay alive: these aren't exactly rib-tickling ingredients. Dead Static Drive – a road trip on which cosmic horror meets golden-hour Americana – is designed to be funny. And, surprisingly, it is.

"I've tried to give it a kind of comic-book feel," says developer Mike Blackney. "Your character's sarcastic and they'll quip about things, giving different lines every time they enter a new location. I like the idea of a character who is vocal, who says entertaining things that can tell you about the world, and that can change every time. I've done that to make it more exciting, more interesting and just to give players a bit more of a window into the world."

He concedes, however, that his lines will never be quite as hilarious as the moments of comedy his game can naturally produce. Take, for example, the humble petrol pump: a staple of each small-town location you'll visit on your journey. Park your car too far away from it, and you'll be yanked back as you try to stretch the nozzle toward your fuel cap. Squeeze the trigger as if you're firing a weapon and you can spray petrol on the ground – which, naturally, can be ignited. "You can blow up the gas pump itself, or you can pour gas on things that get damaged by petrol," Blackney says. "Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying my game's going to be like Metal Gear Solid, but I love games that have lots of mechanics that interact in really interesting ways. You get fun emergent behaviour when you have a single item that has, like, 20 different uses."

One long smorgasbord

There's also emergent behaviour of a different kind to consider, in the form of giant worms that burrow up from the ground. And they're not fussy about where they come out, happily tunnelling beneath vehicles and popping up to send them flying. "The vehicle can hit you, or it

"YOUR VEHICLE CAN HIT YOU, OR IT CAN HIT A PROPANE TANK AND THE PROPANE TANK WILL EXPLODE"

The calm before the storm – or, rather, worm. Cracked pavements and fast food litter have rarely looked so good, and the long crepuscular shadows add atmosphere.



Kiting an enemy towards a patch of petrol is a useful tactic – particularly when you've got something to ignite it with…



'Self-service' has a very different meaning in a world like this. Anything you help yourself to must be carried with you, and transferred between vehicles.





can hit a propane tank and the tank can explode. And those can ignite other vehicles and [prompt] a chain reaction that goes down a line of parked cars. People always laugh at that more than anything I've put in," he says.

It might be funny to watch a row of cars blowing up, but it can also be horrifying in a game where they play such an important role. In many survival games, your inventory is fairly abstract. But there's a more physical element to Dead Static Drive: you'll have to physically lug your bags around and throw them into your vehicle.

"That means you have to keep in mind where it is," Blackney explains. "Suddenly you might find yourself in a dangerous situation and you need to run out back and steal a different car – but then you've left all your stuff in the other one. So you've got to drive around, get out and grab it." It's a process he says should naturally produce scary moments – though here it's not the shock factor of these otherworldly beasts that'll give you the willies, but the thought of losing all your stuff. And if your car should blow up? "Any transient items, like weapons? They're all gone."

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> **The Flame In The Flood is a similarly distinctive survival journey, albeit along rivers rather than roads. Fewer cosmic horrors, too – check it out here: bit.ly/gmflood**

Though you're likely to see at least one car blow up before your journey reaches its terminus, in many respects Dead Static Drive is a celebration of the automobile – and, for that matter, the episodic joy of the road trip. Hailing from a small country town in Australia, Blackney would drive everywhere, since few places were ever within walking distance. "But we'd even drive rather than walk across a busy street sometimes – it was a real car culture. My dad and I used to like cars and Americana and we would talk about that a lot. And so when I started making this game, that's what I started with: cars and driving."

Survival systems

It's a delightfully offbeat brand of survival game, then: gorgeous, reactive, strangely wistful, and as funny as it is tense. Even so, we wonder why there are so many indie survival games around: is it, we ask, a response to real-world fears? "It could be that in part," Blackney muses, though he believes it's more that they offer a systems-led alternative to today's blockbusters. "You're always getting a new experience that no one else is getting," he elaborates. "I played Horizon Zero Dawn and I enjoyed it – it's a fantastic game, really beautiful. But my friends' experience is, like, 10 percent different from mine. But when I'm talking to someone about Don't Starve, and they start talking about armour made out of logs…"

He laughs quietly, clearly looking forward to the creative solutions players will find to the Cthulhian horrors that await – and knowing full well that it's the failures rather than the triumphs that often make for the best anecdotes. ■



The 60 Second Pitch

Road trippin' in the USA with **Mike Blackney**

"My initial pitch is always Grand Theft Cthulhu. If that gets any interest, then I say, OK, it's an existential horror road-trip adventure through the United States of Weird-merica. It's a bit like I'm taking concepts of Mad Max and Cthulhu and putting that in a ridiculous survival game, but one that also has lots of driving, flips and stunts, and horrible deaths that you can't really avoid. It came from an idea I had for a zombie survival game for Game Boy Advance back in 2004 just before I went to uni, and that merged and meshed with a different idea I had for a tactical squad-based game. By the time I started work on Dead Static Drive, I was so sick of zombie stuff that I basically thought about using as many different kinds of creative horror monsters as I could and making it more like The X-Files. So that every time you're in a different location, there are also different monsters, like a monster-of-the-week episode."

Format PC **Developer** Hempuli **ETA** Autumn **Web** bit.ly/gmbaba

#2 BABA IS YOU

Command and stonker



Arvi Teikari's ingenious puzzler is easily understood on sight, but much trickier to explain in words. Essentially, it's a Sokoban-style game in which the blocks are nouns and commands, connected by the word 'is'. So when ROCK is PUSH, you can move a nearby boulder. Push ROCK next to YOU, however, and you can control the rock directly. When WALL is STOP, you're trapped; break that bond and you can pass through the barrier as if it wasn't there.

Teikari conceived Baba Is You last April, at a Nordic Game Jam event, where the theme was 'not there'. "It made me think of the logical operator NOT, how you can negate the meaning of something by saying it's NOT that," Teikari tells us. He soon began to warm to the theme. "HOT and MELT were the first words that came to mind," he says. "And it turned out to be much more interesting than I'd expected." Teikari subsequently won the Jam.

Rule breaker

There is, he says, a dissonance at the heart of his game. After all, your ability to change the properties of objects means each puzzle is basically about breaking its own rules. Give the player too much freedom and they can bypass challenges too easily. "There are several levels where I had to encase the 'WALL is STOP' text in a solid wall, because otherwise the player could say WALL is PUSH and just destroy all the walls in the level," he says. But he acknowledges that a big part of Baba Is You's appeal lies in finding these creative solutions.

Teikari's answer is an 'oscillating' difficulty curve: new words are introduced through relatively simple tasks that allow players to enjoy the surprise of finding unusual ways to progress. Then the challenge will ramp up, the level design limiting the more common ways to bypass obstacles and forcing the player to seek out more devious methods. He cites Stephen Lavelle's fiendishly difficult Stephen's Sausage Roll as a key influence: "Really interesting puzzle games put you in situations with seemingly simple tools and it looks impossible, but there's a surprising depth to something in the puzzle that allows for the solution to emerge."



Teikari isn't keen on puzzles that rely on limiting the player's space for their challenge – so you won't find many of those here.

A Space Invaders-style stage demonstrates the flexibility of Teikari's game, which can easily double as a kind of game-making tool. It's one he's opening up to everyone: "People who are not really interested in the puzzles can create their own playground with the editor," Teikari says. "I realised I want players to make their own words instead of just levels." A huge chunk of development time, he says, has been spent on tools to let players change the game.

It's headed to PC later this year, but Teikari is keen to port Baba Is You to other formats – particularly one. "I'm a huge Nintendo fanboy," he laughs. "So to bring this to the Switch would be extremely cool." DELIGHTED is GM. ■



BABA is MELT? How very insulting.

Small... But Perfectly Formed

Five mobile indie puzzlers to kick your brain into gear



THREES

A match-three game in a literal sense, in that you're pairing up multiples of the number three, while trying not to let those pesky ones and twos dominate the 4x4 grid. Threes' most valuable tiles have personalities, so sliding them together is like arranging a meet-cute. Adorable and addictive.



TOPSOIL

A deceptively tricky test of management, this bucolic belter has you arranging plants so you can harvest as many as possible with a single tap. You'll need to make sure the layers match too, however – and with some that take several turns to grow and others that wilt over time, smart forward planning is required.



ROAD NOT TAKEN

Spry Fox's underrated roguelike puzzler sends you out in harsh winter environments to rescue lost children, distracting or destroying threats in ways you'll only discover through experimentation. It's as tough as the frigid weather, but offers moments of surprise almost every time you play.



A GOOD SNOWMAN IS HARD TO BUILD

Probably the cutest Sokoban-style puzzler around, Alan Hazelden's wintry brain-buster is true to its title. Hemmed in by hedges, you must carefully roll snowballs to the right sizes to build a snowman. And then you get to give your new friend a hug.



SPL-T

After the sublime Year Walk and Device 6, Swedish duo Simogo conceived this artfully minimalist puzzler, where you tap the screen to split it in two, forming boxes that only score points when their number – based on the splits you've made thus far – drops to zero. Simple stuff, but incredibly absorbing.



Format PC **Developer** Cimmeria Studios **ETA** Winter **Web** bit.ly/gmbeamtale

#3 BEAM: TALE OF THE DIMENSION DOOR

An arrow to the glee

Sometimes all you really need is one brilliant hook, and for once we're not talking about the grappling kind. The debut game from Yorkshire-based indie Cimmeria Studios leans on a fairly well-worn idea – teleportation – but the way it's used here makes this oldest of chestnuts feel fresh and exciting.

"Beam is set in a beautiful world that has been left in ruins," designer Louis Hayes Greenwood tells us of the handsome pixel-art platformer. Its eponymous hero is a sprightly hunter armed with a bow, which proves to be much more than just a weapon. Fire an arrow, and you can teleport to wherever it is while it's airborne.

String theory

This sets up some potentially fascinating puzzles, but for now Cimmeria is focused on what it means for locomotion. Beam might be the hero of the piece, but he's fairly diminutive in stature, often dwarfed by his environment. Still, facing some tall cliffs, he can reach the top within seconds – if not quite in a single bound. His first arrow arcs up and across; one teleport later and he's hovering in mid-air, prompting a brief period of slowdown while he aims again. The second shot carries him up and over, to the next screen. It's basically a double-jump, but with the kind of range that would have even Mario casting envious looks.

Backed by experienced programmer Alexander Wester, Greenwood – whose credits include artwork for Watch Dogs and Tom Clancy's The Division – is hoping for a Christmas launch for Beam, though he's aware that it might take a little longer to finish off. But in brighter news, it sounds like teleportation arrows are just the beginning. "At the moment we are focusing on [that] but we do have a few more interesting features to come," he says. Watch this space. ■



Those spikes seem ominously bloody. Perhaps Beam needed a few guinea pigs to work out any kinks in his teleportation tech...



Format XO, PC **Developer** Lazy Bear Games **ETA** 2018 **Web** bit.ly/gmgravekeeper

#4 GRAVEYARD KEEPER

A matter of life and death (mostly death)

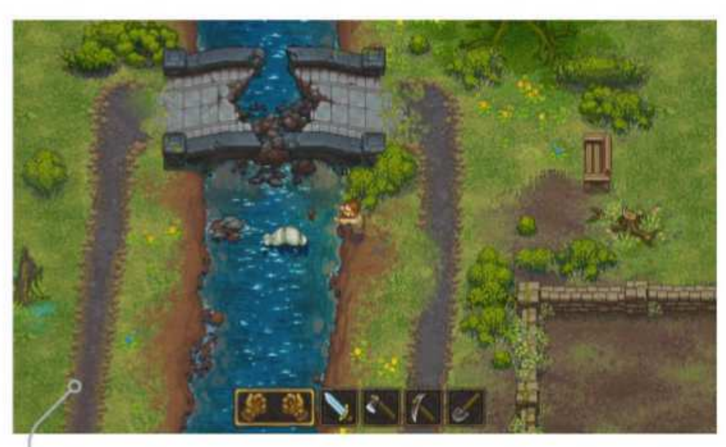


For those who found Stardew Valley a bit too bright and happy, here's a management sim in which you'll be burying something very different from pumpkin and cauliflower seeds. From the Russian studio behind Punch Club, Graveyard Keeper has a macabre streak that makes it much more than just another Harvest Moon-alike.

Keeping the burial plots clean isn't too difficult at first, and you'll even have time for a spot of regular farming. But then the bodies arrive, and you'll soon be busier digging graves to put them in. As the corpses steadily pile up, so do the moral quandaries. No room for a fresh cadaver? Dump it in the river. Short of money? Selling a few spare parts should raise funds. And if you've forgotten to prepare a meat dish for the village fête – well, will anyone be able to tell it's not chicken?

Despite a sense of humour that's not just dark but liable to suck in passing planets, Graveyard Keeper asks you to take your job seriously. Each activity earns knowledge points: these can be spent on anything from honing practical skills to learning about the spirit world – which might just help you deal with any marauding ghosts. It may be too dark to win over Valley girls and boys, but like the titular keeper, we're digging it. ■

"NO ROOM FOR A FRESH CADAVER? DUMP IT IN THE RIVER"



The developer describes Graveyard Keeper as "the most inaccurate medieval cemetery management sim of 2018". We can't disagree.



CRYPT KEEPERS

An adventuring party of experts take us on a quest into the world of videogame dungeons



ideogames are like a ploughman's lunch; they have variations here or there, but there are a few staple elements that you'll find in almost every platter. Arguably, the mature English cheddar of videogames is the dungeon, and like any decent cheese, there are a lot of techniques that go into creating just the right flavour, texture, and overall experience. Let's have a gander at how you do it!

A-maze-ing design

First off, how do you actually make a dungeon? "As a level designer, I have to think 'who built this?' and 'why is this here?'" says Charlie Edwards, a designer at PixelCount studios, previously a senior designer at Lionhead Studios for Fable II and III. He worked on the series' dungeons, and he runs us through the entire design process. "When designing a dungeon, we need to consider things like what the aim of the dungeon is - the 'treasure' or any story elements."

"To aid with navigation we use environmental features that players can identify, and use lighting to lead the player along. I like to have the environment change as the player explores so each area is easily identified." Subtle visual cues like this are essential to make sure you don't get lost or confused, or unintentionally fall into spike pits. "Traps are better for tighter corridors as they add a sense of tension, but should never be unfair and need a 'tell' - such as a click or brief activation animation - so the player can react. Pre-warning the player with piles of bones and so on is a classic heads-up to imminent danger."

As well as this, designers need to think about how they can make these spooky environments feel physical, and the best way to do that is to make them useful for killing monsters. "It can be very nice to have handily placed environmental features that the player can use such as pits to knock enemies in or even trap elements to use to your advantage."

Charlie tells us what he thinks is an essential element of a great dungeon that's conjured up through all of these techniques. "The best dungeons have a sense of foreboding as you progress. Having little dead-ends off the main path to explore with a suitable reward for doing so makes it drip with atmosphere and have a sense of place and purpose."

"Dungeons can be the most fun to build, and can really bring out the devious nature of the level designer. With some nice design, they can be a-maze-ing."

> "DUNGEONS CAN BE THE MOST FUN TO BUILD, AND CAN REALLY BRING OUT THE DEVIOUS NATURE OF THE LEVEL DESIGNER"

Stairing down a challenge

Sometimes, dungeons aren't areas that you can dip in and out of. "With a game set entirely in claustrophobic tunnels, foreshadowing upcoming events or locations by showing them looming in the distance is not an option," says Antti Tiihonen, co-founder of Almost Human, who worked on much of the level design in The Legend Of Grimrock and its sequel, games which put players in control of a party of prisoners navigating

ARTY FARTY

Over the course of our interview, Charlie presents us with this explosively funny mock-up of an area axed from the final version of Fable II. "I found a flame trap particle effect while planning traps and noticed the bums on the statues. At the time I was working late and eating a free curry Lionhead provided... didn't need much more to trigger the warped imagination."

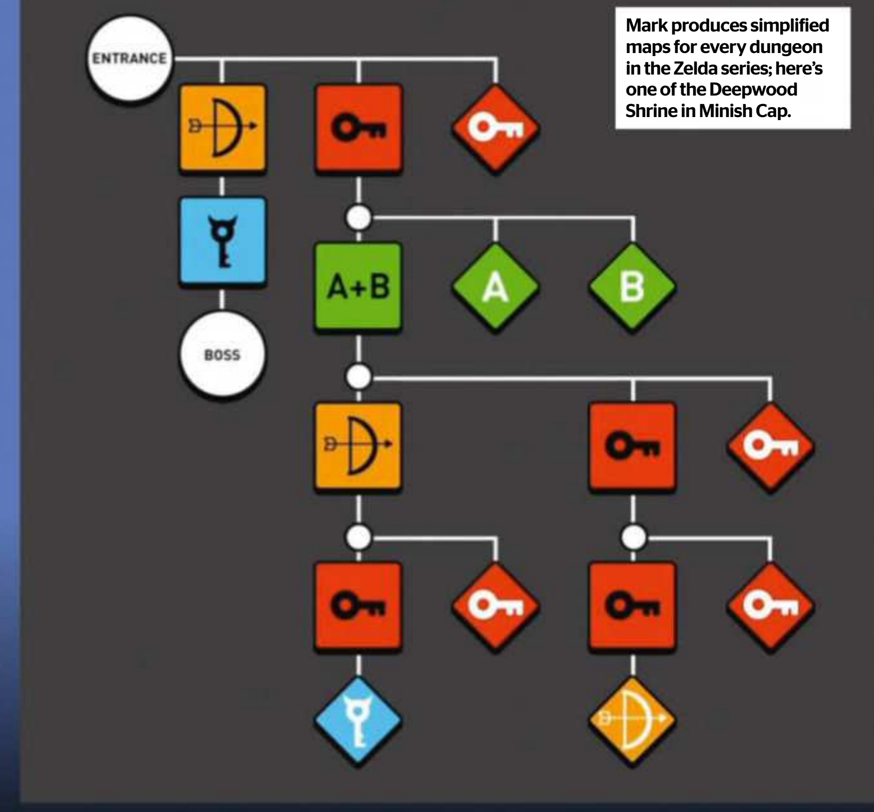
perilous traps and fearsome beasts inside the sprawling mega-dungeon of Mount Grimrock.

When you're confined to an enclosed interior space, you have to really think about what will encourage a player to keep moving forward. "With a long, continuous dungeon it takes some effort to make sure that the player always has sensible goals, both in the short- and long-term." So, what did Antti and the Almost Human team employ to keep players motivated? They made use of perhaps one of real life's most demotivating inventions: stairs.

"The player starts near the top of a mountain and is always heading deeper downwards. That way whenever the player finds a staircase leading down, the player knows they're one step closer to the goal."



The final boss fight can make or break a dungeon. Everything is ultimately leading to that climactic moment – it needs to feel worth it.



Mark produces simplified maps for every dungeon in the Zelda series; here's one of the Deepwood Shrine in Minish Cap.





A series famed for its dark and gloomy medieval-esque spaces, Dark Souls has some of the most striking dungeons around. The third game is no exception.







DICE CITY

As with many videogame tropes we now take for granted, dungeon crawls originate in pen and paper role-playing games. As the name suggests, they were an integral part of Dungeons & Dragons from the start, which in turn inspired some of the earliest videogames in the late 1970s. According to D&D creator Gary Gygax, they first started with a wargaming scenario that saw invaders infiltrating an enemy fortress through an underground tunnel. It was so fun that the group kept replaying it, adding more and more complexity – eventually creating a labyrinthine dungeon.

Puzzling over

Talking more with Antti, we discover that what seems like a challenging restriction of level design actually brings with it a number of benefits. "Designing a game based in a dungeon can be a great time saver."

"I commonly use a design pattern where I prototype puzzles or other challenges in isolation and then transplant those encounters into the actual playable levels when I have established a good feeling of where they could fit in the game. With dungeons, this transplantation process is easy since the environments are similar in nature through the dungeon, so I have a lot of freedom on where to place these events."

Perhaps it's that potential for variety and complexity that makes dungeons so compelling – and popular – in games. We ask Antti what kind of underground adventure he most enjoys: "I really respond to the dungeons where the entire place is part of a grand, overarching puzzle."

"I REALLY RESPOND TO THE DUNGEONS WHERE THE ENTIRE PLACE IS PART OF A GRAND, OVERARCHING PUZZLE"

A Link to the boss

Mark Brown is the bright mind behind the Game Maker's Toolkit on YouTube, an instructional video series for up-and-coming game designers. Mark wanted to make an episode on the dungeons of The Legend Of Zelda franchise, "but I realised that an episode about Zelda dungeons would mean I'd need to play just about every Zelda game released and take extensive notes about the design and construction of the dungeons. So, I decided I might as well do it in public as a video series!"

Mark seemed like the perfect person to ask about what actually separates the good dungeons from the bad. "One is branching paths – are there lots of different rooms to check out, or are you just led from room to room? Another is choice – can the player work on multiple problems at once, or is their path very linear and prescripted? And a third is backtracking – does the player need to build a mental map of the dungeon in their head as they

LODE TRIP

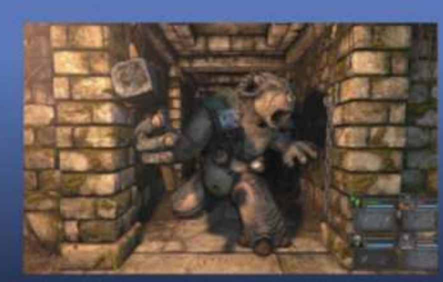
There's a unique feeling that comes with dungeons in games that we like to call the 'holiday immersion effect'. Imagine, if you will, returning home after a two-week holiday; it's been a while since you've looked around the street that you live on, sat down in your living room, or slept in your own bed. You get a sense of familiarity that makes you feel more grounded in reality. It's almost identical to how you might feel after re-emerging from an especially meaty, complex, and engrossing dungeon. Ultimately, you find yourself more immersed in the world for having been taken out of it for a stretch.

revisit older areas and bypass obstacles they saw earlier?"

In Mark's mind, there's one example from the series that stands apart from any other: "Lakebed Temple from Twilight Princess. I think it has some of that clever puzzle box design, where you use a spinning staircase to redirect water from one side of the map to the other, but it's far more accessible and easy going than something like Ocarina Of Time's Water Temple."

They may be a little grimy, a little creepy, and a little infested with monsters, but there's something uniquely magical about the videogame dungeon, as alive and well today as it was in Zork over 30 years ago. If spending our days hanging out in dark corridors is wrong, we don't want to be right.


Astrid Johnson



Fighting monsters in a dungeon, like this guy in Grimrock, can feel totally different to battling them in the outside world, thanks to the confined space.







The Witcher 3 might be better known for its vast wildernesses and open spaces, but some of its best moments occur deep beneath the earth.



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HOW WE SCORE

0-39 Awful Avoid it as you would a bullet with your name on.
40-59 Poor Major issues here that won't be solved with a hug.
60-69 Decent A mixed bag filled with sweets and sharp stones.
70-79 Good Some flaws, but still a very enjoyable experience.
80-89 Excellent Buy it, love it, thank us when you're done.
90-100 Outstanding A rare and essential piece of brilliance.

The small print: We rate games in comparison to what else is available on the same system, in the same genre, and for the same format at the time of release. So this year's FIFA might score less than a FIFA from three years ago, but still be a better game. Because time, and our expectations, move on. Hey, you're smart, you get it…

GM GOLD AWARD Not awarded based simply on score, but rather given to games that possess a special blend of qualities. For instant classics that you won't regret owning.

Format PS4 (reviewed), XO, PC **Publisher** Konami **Developer** Konami **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-4

METAL GEAR SURVIVE

Solid, but no snake



Metal Gear is a series with a list of critically acclaimed entries going back decades. It tells the psuedo-history of Big Boss and Solid Snake through a series of stealth missions in a decades-long conflict for control over nuclear walking tanks. In all that time it was headed up by creator Hideo Kojima, and the series' quirks became his trademarks. This latest instalment, however, has been plagued by controversy, including hidden messages in the game which express complaints from staff, and anger from fans over what Konami has decided to do with the series.

It's worth providing a little bit of context to all that. Metal Gear started as a top-down stealth game in the late '80s. Kojima produced a sequel, Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake, but it was the series' debut on the original PlayStation with Metal Gear Solid in 1998 that made waves. Here, all the trademarks of the series were cemented. Solid Snake found his voice in actor David Hayter, the absurd gadgets were introduced, and the parade of cartoonish villains rolled out in style. Each subsequent instalment indulged Kojima's quirks all the more, culminating in Metal Gear Solid 4, which concluded the series' story arc with a huge, over the top finale in 2008.

Then the series underwent something of a reinvention with Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain and its standalone prologue, Ground Zeroes. With a whole new engine, the sometimes clunky controls and many of the more cartoonish elements were abandoned in favour of polished open-world stealth action. Vehicles, companions, base building… The Phantom Pain was a massive leap forward for the series, though some fans did miss the narrative-heavy style.

For all its success, The Phantom Pain was not a game without problems. Clearly unfinished, owing to a long and troubled development, the game was fractured in a way no previous Metal Gear had been. Dangling plot threads, missing levels, and a repetitious second act left a sour taste for some, including at Konami. The game's release coincided with revelations about the company's practices that put it in an extremely unfavourable light. To top it all off, due to behind the scenes disputes, Konami parted ways with Kojima shortly after. Then Konami announced Metal Gear Survive. A new game with zombies, but no involvement from Kojima.

GM CERTIFIED 100% INDEPENDENT REVIEWS SINCE 1993

> "WHAT SELF-RESPECTING GAME WOULDN'T INCLUDE A CUTE ONE-EYED WOLF?"

Limping on

But despite the troubled circumstances of its development, this isn't as far away from a classic Metal Gear game as it seems. The strangest thing is how much a game marketed almost exclusively as a co-op experience actually focuses on its surprisingly robust single-player mode.

Abandoning the saga of the main series and retaining none of its cast,

Sam's Metal Gear code name: Elegant Haggis


EQP
1

SINS OF THE FATHER

The most Metal Gear-y moments in Survive



Loads of cutscenes

Honestly, the game is front-loaded with about half an hour of almost non-stop cinematics. They're full of daft exposition and swooping camera angles. Kojima would be proud.



A man called Goodluck

Characters in Metal Gear are notorious for their totally absurd titles and codenames, so Goodluck is right at home. Previous crimes include: Laughing Octopus, Liquid Snake, and Revolver Ocelot.



Military fetishism

Despite being a theoretically anti-war series, Metal Gear features plenty of gawking over military hardware. Survive carries on this tradition with loads of detailed weapon models, outfits, and plenty of jargon.



Unsubtle references

Odd Moby Dick references in The Phantom Pain not enough? Get ready for endless Dante's Inferno nods. The world is even called Dite (the city encompassing the sixth to ninth circles of Hell in the poem).



You can have a skull face

A character creator in a game that takes itself seriously is risky, but Metal Gear already has so much to laugh at that having you enter every cutscene with face paint is pretty appropriate.

INSTANT EXPERT

A weapon to surpass Metal Gear



1 The first class of weapon you'll be using is spears, a two-handed sharp stick perfect for poking through fences and barriers. Not great for managing groups of enemies without a barricade, but it helps keep you at a safe distance from the undead horde.

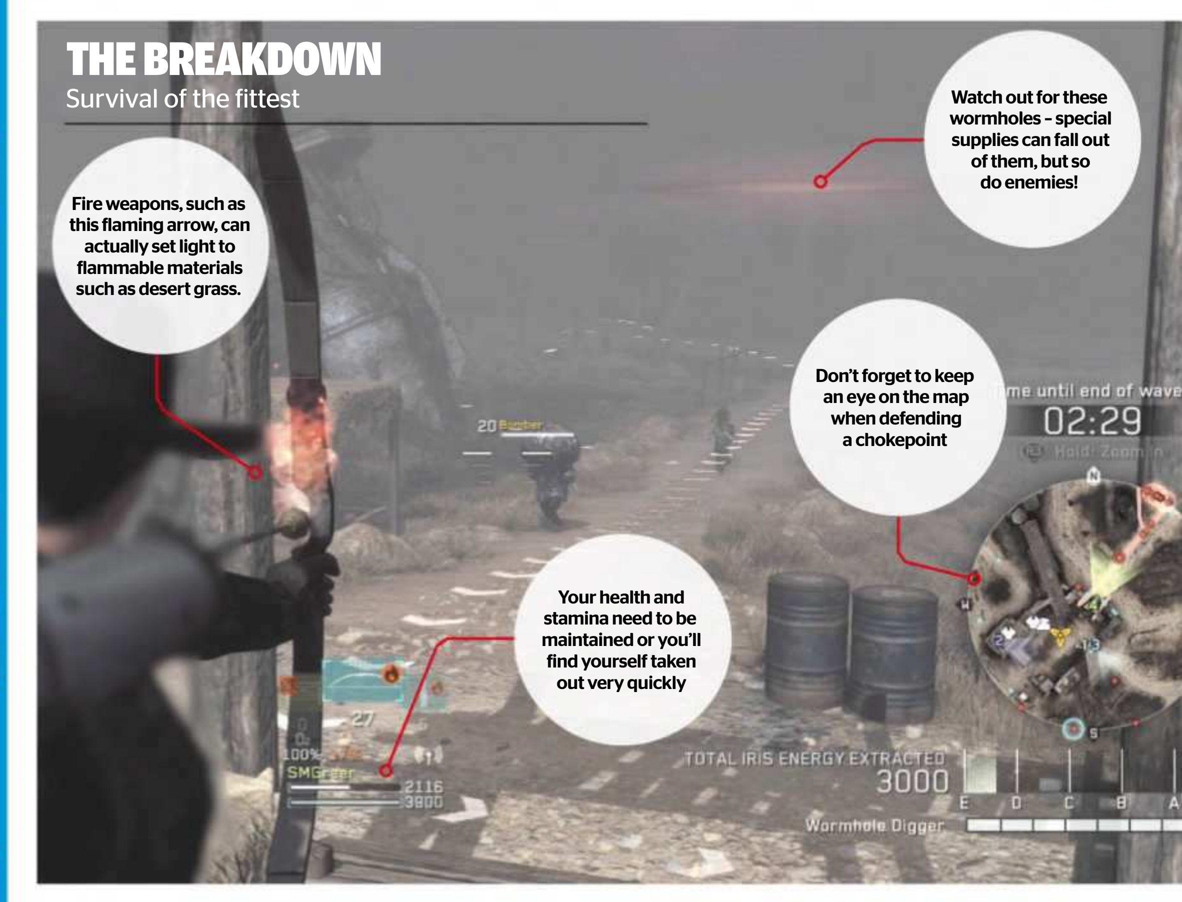
2 Smaller, one-handed weapons are available such as machetes, axes, and even a shovel. Later on, elemental weapons become an option, such as an electric baton that lets you stun enemies. Perfect for crowd control when things get out of hand.

3 Bigger two-handed swinging weapons like the hammer or blade chopper can be found or crafted later, allowing you to leap into groups of enemies and cut your way through them. Slow but powerful, these can get you out of a tough spot.

4 The bow is a new weapon for Metal Gear, but it feels right at home as you sneak around. It can be loaded with multiple arrow types (we're fond of high-damage heavy arrows), and you can recover your projectiles from slain enemies, so you won't run out of ammo.

THE BREAKDOWN

Survival of the fittest



Survive stars your player-created character, a grunt in the private army of Big Boss. Following the events of Ground Zeroes, in which Mother Base was attacked and destroyed, your character is left for dead. A mysterious character called Goodluck recruits you against your will to travel into a parallel dimension (it doesn't waste any time before, in classic Metal Gear fashion, going off the rails) ruled by a parasitic life-form that turns the dead into crystallized nasties. Trapped there, you have to follow the instructions left by Goodluck to make your way home and rescue other survivors.

That character creator deserves special mention. Not because it's especially comprehensive (it isn't), but because there's something weirdly engaging about being able to put your own custom hero into every cutscene.

The plot is mostly nonsense, an excuse to drive the game forward, but there's something quite fun about a studio actually trying to form a coherent story around the most ludicrous of ideas. Absurd references to Dante's Inferno abound, and nobody seems particularly bothered by the existence of other dimensions. Not that the Metal Gear series is a stranger to out-there plots.



You're pretty good

Survive might be removed from the characters and events of the main series but it's still a stealth game, lifting wholesale the highly praised mechanics of the recent Phantom Pain and transplanting them into a horror-themed survival world. That means you get all those slick controls and polished animations, as well as the intuitive interface. While zombies are hardly the most inspired foes, it's surprising just

SERIES GUIDE

The Metal Gear Solid saga



The original MGS was very grey, but its snowy setting brought a ton of atmosphere to simple graphics.



The sniper duel from Snake Eater could be dodged by playing with the console's internal clock.



Sometimes all these tough military types want is a snuggle with a cute puppy.



METAL GEAR SOLID (1998)

The original, and arguably best. It was full of great moments: the battle with Sniper Wolf, using cigarettes to see laser traps, Mantis reading your memory card, and the showdown between Solid and Liquid Snakes.



METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER (2004)

One of the most self-contained games in the franchise. This one took players decades back to tell the origins of Big Boss, villain of the original Metal Gear games, during a lengthy covert operation in Cold War Russia.



METAL GEAR SOLID 4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS (2008)

The finale of the main story, wrapping up the plot with loads of mad gadgets and part-organic mechs that moo. Likely to put a tear in the eye of any fan of the series.



METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN (2015)

A reinvention and overhaul of the series, it took things open world and polished the mechanics to a fine sheen. Considered by many to be the best action stealth game ever.

how well the survival angle suits the gameplay of The Phantom Pain. Sneaking around hordes of the undead feels like a natural fit. They're deadly, and it only takes a few hits to take you out in the early game, so making use of cover and concealment makes perfect sense. There's a sense of danger in Survive that wasn't really present in The Phantom Pain, where you played a more powerful character. Rummaging around the environment for supplies fits the pace of exploration too, with you regularly ducking into abandoned buildings or scanning around for approaching enemies.

The main additions to the action are the array of melee weapons and the ability to construct makeshift defences. Studying your environment to identify chokepoints where you can place barriers to slow down your enemies lets you tackle groups in a more manageable fashion, poking at them through a fence with a spear. Of course that core loop of avoiding and funnelling enemies evolves as the game progresses. New weapons and gadgets, as well as an army of different enemy types, mean your tactics will change to something much less defined later in. You might still use those basics dozens of hours in, but you'll also wield traps, flaming arrows, thundering two-handed hammers, and even weaponised balloons.

> **"YOU'LL WIELD TRAPS, HAMMERS, AND EVEN WEAPONISED BALLOONS"**

Every action consumes resources. Everything breaks, and even your character gets worn down, their stamina and health falling if you don't keep them fed and watered. It's keeps you on edge during encounters, not just because of the in-the-moment risk, but because of the potential knock-on effects of wasting resources that will come back to bite you later. It's not stressful, but it's enough to keep you paying attention.

If the game has a big failure, it's that it holds back for far too long. A long stretch of the game is simply mucking about with the basics, with not a single hint as to the expanded content waiting later on. It's more than possible, especially in conjunction with the confused marketing, that people will give up in the early hours fearing that the game has shown all it has to offer. It's a shame, because there is a lot in the game that's worth seeing.

The overall structure of the game has you venturing out from your field base, a customisable home where you'll be crafting and upgrading new gear. You have to travel to find supplies and mission items such as hard drives containing data on the forces sent before you. Out in the world you'll find caches of special items (opening them means a mini-game where failure draws the attention of nearby enemies) and teleporters that allow you to fast travel. Reactivating these devices means defending them from hordes of the undead, so you'll need to arrive at each attempt fully prepared. If the teleporter is destroyed, it's game over.

These handful of definitive game over states unfortunately highlight the frustrating checkpoint system. You'll rarely be forced to revert to an earlier point, as there are special items that allow you to recover from fatal blows, but when you do have to, you can lose a lot of progress.

Mist opportunity

Your expeditions eventually take you into what the game calls The Dust, a massive wall of poisonous gas that surrounds the edge of the map. In

You still have access to vehicles such as the D-Walker, but you'll have to find them first.

there, you'll need to rely on a dwindling oxygen supply and confront tougher baddies as well as bigger, stranger threats. Creeping through the thick mist as silhouettes move in the gloom is incredibly evocative, the game at its most atmospheric even if the visuals aren't the most exciting. Imagination is a powerful tool, and Survive uses it well in these sections, making you jump at shadows and dread what could be hidden just a few feet ahead.

Survive's world suffers from the same issues as The Phantom Pain's – it's rather bland, and not memorable. Endless desert and rocks with the odd hut here and there hardly competes with the richly realised settings of The Witcher 3 or Horizon Zero Dawn.

Graphically, the Fox Engine still impresses, but the locations Konami has built with it are rather dull. Some standout locations or structures would help it leave more of an impression but, as it is, the setting is utterly disposable.

Phantom painless

In execution, Survive is actually no more removed from the rest of the series than The Phantom Pain. It even opens front-loaded with lengthy cutscenes and copious exposition, maintaining the typical pace of a Metal Gear game in its opening hours.

Where it differs from previous titles is largely in tone and style, though even there not as much as you'd expect. As mentioned, it's got its OTT cutscenes, and the characters all fit into familiar archetypes, even if they're much plainer than anything in the main series.

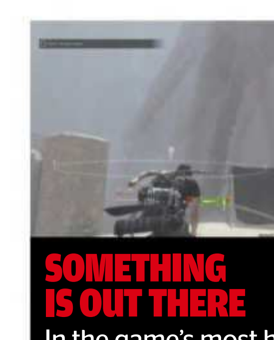
So there are no men shooting bees out their mouths, or psychics reading your memory cards. Survive definitely lacks Metal Gear's typically strong personality, and suffers from this – though in some ways it's a benefit.

"IT IS CERTAINLY NOT SOMETHING THAT'LL BE A PERFECT FIT FOR ALL METAL GEAR FANS"

Survive may be less interesting in its narrative, which is quite a feat given it features inter-dimensional travel, but equally it's completely devoid of any of the unpleasant moments that have previously plagued the series. There are no sequences involving undressing a young girl with your X-ray vision, or watching your female subordinate showering. We just wish exorcising these bothersome elements didn't also mean missing out on the likes of D-Dog.

It's not completely lacking in charm or surprises. The group of survivors you cobble together might be made up of two-dimensional characters, but there's something wholesome about the way the game has you all sticking together and looking after each other. They're not well drawn enough to consider family, but it's still nice to be part of a group, trying to help one another.

The plot eventually builds to a pleasantly daft and bombastic finish, even if the story it tells is mostly disposable fluff. Yet the conclusion of the story is hardly where the game ends. Where you're likely to spend a lot of your time, especially if you have a



SOMETHING IS OUT THERE

In the game's most hostile region, there are bigger problems than zombies

Out in The Dust, things get much tougher. You're on a limited supply of oxygen, visibility is reduced and your waypoint markers aren't available.

Yet the biggest threat lurking in The Dust isn't getting lost, it's a huge creature that moves through the mist, destroying everything in its path. Such strange creatures are exciting, and it's a shame Konami didn't tease them. It's exactly the kind of thing that would have let people know the game was more than fighting off waves of zombies.





Meet Skullface, our custom character. Blind in one eye but made up to perfection.





The world isn't memorable, and is very grey and brown, but there is a stark beauty to it sometimes.



BIG BOSS THE BUILDER

Can you fix it?

One of your main objectives as the game progresses is to kit out your home base. It'll take a lot of resources, but the payoff is loads of new options opening up. For starters, as you collect motherboards out in the world you'll unlock more structures to construct. To build more advanced weapons and gear you'll need to have new kinds of workbenches, and these are a must as you begin to encounter tougher enemy types.

You can also invest in farms and water-gathering once you have other survivors to manage. This can save you precious time spent gathering supplies by giving you a steady stream of clean water and food. Just keep in mind you'll need to share all that food with everyone else. You'll also be able to put together teams to gather crafting supplies as well, so you can work towards those expensive projects.

Of course, the main aim with your base is to turn it into something defensible. Fences, barricades, traps and obstacles – you'll need to be building them all to prepare for eventual attacks on your base. It can be easy to settle for a simple line of barriers, but you'll be surprised how quickly groups of enemies can tear through them. Multiple layers of defences will be needed if you want to keep all your hard-earned resources protected. Just don't forget to clean up all the wreckage around your base – it's going to provide space and a host of valuable resources.

regular group of friends to play with, is the online co-op mode.

Here you don't roam the open world, but instead get dropped into large missions where the main objective is to secure and plant a 'wormhole digger', defending it against several waves of enemies before finally being showered with rewards should you survive the whole way. It sees the game's mechanics take off a little, as your team of four can combine different weapons and abilities. It also makes managing the onslaught of enemies a much more engaging experience, because you can employ several different tactics instead of relying on just a few staple ones, and is a space where you can feel a little more experimental, as playing solo demands you be more conservative.

Better with friends

It's also a bit more intense, as the game throws far more enemies at you in co-op, attacking from all directions. Fail to work together and you'll find yourselves completely surrounded, but this just presents an opportunity for dramatic rescues. It's a multiplayer game that pushes you into memorable moments frequently, all driven by gameplay. Communicating with friends on the higher difficulties turns very quickly into the group shouting and panicking – but in the best way. You know you've really bought into a game when you're yelling "We need more fences!" at the top of your lungs.

The interface in multiplayer works, but it is very strange. The lobby screen drops players into a simulation-like environment where you can spawn your workbenches and various other tools, with each player's credentials projected onto a wall above. For what the game needs to do it works well, but it's a far cry from your typical multiplayer lobby and takes some to get used to.

Compared with the recently released Monster Hunter World, Metal Gear Survive doesn't have nearly as much to offer. It's not as varied nor as imaginative. But it's strong enough on its own that, if you're looking for something else to play with friends that has a completely different pace, then this is frequently a real thrill. We here at GamesMaster have had way more fun with it than we expected.

That's the shocking thing about Metal Gear Survive. Expectations really couldn't have been lower, and Konami's marketing certainly hasn't helped, showcasing a game that looked dreadfully dull compared with its illustrious predecessors. Yet the end result, while certainly considerably different from earlier Metal Gear games, is actually very compelling. It puts the excellent mechanics from The Phantom Pain to good use in a context that makes for a perfect fit. What it lacks in imagination it makes up for with polish and challenge, giving us a survival game that feels a world away from the likes of Ark or Minecraft.

So while it's impossible to say whether Konami should or shouldn't have continued the series in the absence of its creator, what we can say is that Metal Gear Survive is a really good game in its own right. Despite all the concerns, despite all the doubts, the team working on the game has produced something well thought out and coherent. For all the trouble behind the scenes, the cracks do not show in Survive.

It's certainly not a game that'll be a perfect fit for all Metal Gear fans, but for those who want a solid open-world game with polished stealth and survival elements, this is a game that doesn't just survive, it thrives. ■

GM LOVES...

- Polished design that suits a survival game well.
- Despite a slow start, it gets better the further in you get.

GM HATES...

- The bland visuals don't live up to the weirdness of the setting.
- It just doesn't have as much personality as MGS should.

Better than...



State of Decay
Survive isn't as expansive as State Of Decay, but its polish and stealth gameplay put it head and shoulders above this survival rival.

Worse than...



Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
Despite cutting some bad stuff, Survive fails to feature anything as memorable as D-Dog or a rocket hand.

NEED TO KNOW



There are plenty of frivolous, overpriced microtransactions in the game that boost resource collection. Also, if you want a second character slot it'll cost about £7.99. Not good.

GM JUDGEMENT

75%



A competent and well thought out survival game, but we wish it had more imagination.
Sam Greer

Nice village you've got there. Would be a shame if anything happened to it.







Format PS4, XO, PC (reviewed) **Publisher** Warhorse Studios **Developer** Warhorse Studios **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE

In medieval Bohemia, carrying a sword is Prague-matic

As a great sage once asked: is this the real life, or is this just fantasy? Well, we can finally put that one to rest. This is real life. Being a first-person ARPG set in a medieval world, Kingdom Come: Deliverance must be a bit like Skyrim, right? The answer, as you get punched out by a drunkard for the crime of asking him to pay for some nails, with nary a fireball in sight, is no. This isn't like Skyrim. It's a grounded world in which boys make deliveries, before becoming heavily armoured warriors.

Bohemia, 1403. A time of rhapsodies, knights, and hard liquor that lets you save your game, but still a mundane sort of place if you're a poor boy from a poor family. The fear of sudden death by the sword certainly livens the place up, as protagonist Henry discovers when he is flung out into the world thanks to an act of random violence from a marauding army. Our boy ends up joining the cause of Wenceslas, rightful ruler of Bohemia (and, we assume, a good king... despite what we've heard about his 'frivolous activities') against his half-brother the King of Hungary, who's just invaded.

Combat is brutal and it's incredibly easy to die. Healing, reading, persuasion and swordplay are skills you need to learn, although you understand horse-riding just by looking at a horse. You'll need to eat, wash yourself, and maintain your equipment – and there's lots of it. In addition to the main weapon slots, Henry has 16 items of clothing he can wear at once, building up layers of protection against the cruel melee weapons and other historically accurate ways of dying.

Magnifico

When we say historically accurate, we're not talking in the Assassin's Creed mould – the game opens with a cutscene involving an emperor, who dies without needing to be stabbed – but a story that takes place during real historical events gives the game a great sense of place, something underlined by the detailed nature of its many intermeshed systems.

There is also a great deal of combat, handily compartmentalised even during larger battles into one-on-one duels thanks to a lock-on system. Weapon slashes follow your character movement, and backpedalling away while blocking is a necessary skill if you're to avoid injury. Then you can chain a few moves together and pound your opponent into the mud. Outside of the crunching fights you'll hunt for meat, get drunk and enjoy the charisma boost, threaten villagers until they spill their secrets, and sneak around robbing whole garrisons. Skills improve as you use them, but the stamina bar is your major enemy, dropping as you run, gallop on a horse, or take damage. Die, and it's back to the last save – whether that was a checkpoint, a bed, or your last drink of magic save booze.

Unfortunately, the game's long, slow opening section, lack of handholding or quick saves, and buggy nature – that last one sure to be patched – mean it doesn't make a great first impression. Deliverance opens up into a huge, nonlinear game, and one that comes with real opportunities for role-playing as you can mould Henry freely without the constraints of traditional RPG classes. There's great potential here, but it requires perseverance. ■

"WHEN WE SAY HISTORICALLY ACCURATE, WE'RE NOT TALKING IN THE ASSASSIN'S CREED MOULD"

Why was the period from the fifth to 15th centuries known as the Dark Ages? Because they were the days of the knights.

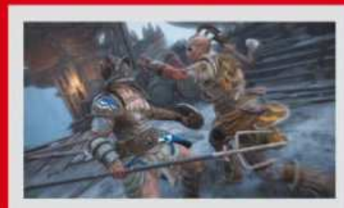
GM LOVES...

- Lush looks bring medieval Bohemia to life.
- Brian Blessed turns up for a booming cameo appearance.

GM HATES...

- Performance issues abound, but these can be fixed.
- The game's a slow starter, and uninviting to get into.

Better than...



For Honor
In the accuracy stakes at least. You won't be fighting a samurai or a viking here, and KCD has a deeper storyline than Ubisoft's hack-and-slasher.

Worse than...



TES V: Skyrim
Skyrim was in a bit of a state at launch too, but it's a much more immediate game than Kingdom Come: Deliverance. And has dragons in.

NEED TO KNOW



Strapped for cash, Warhorse Studios turned to Kickstarter, originally planning to raise $500,000 to prove to investors there was a market for the game. It ended up bringing in $2 million.

GM JUDGEMENT

72%

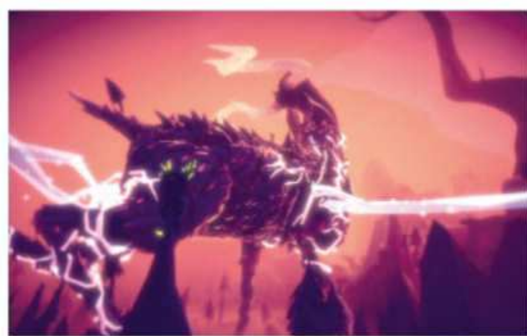


The love that's gone into developing KCD shows through its outer skin of bugs and bloody violence.
Ian Evenden



What a view – climbing trees is the first ability you unlock, though further skills after that come at a trickle.





Is there really no killing? Not unless you count making Fe jump into bottomless pits...

Format Switch, PS4 (reviewed), XO, PC **Publisher** EA **Developer** Zoink **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

FE

Where the wild things sing

It hasn't been long since we were pining for more games that encourage meaningful interactions without violence, and Fe seems like a very worthy example. Playing as the titular fox-like creature, you're tasked with healing a forest overrun with menacing machines, not by shooting them, but through the power of song.

Beginning with one ethereal sound emitted like a sonar beam, there's up to six languages Fe can learn to communicate with other animals and progress through the forest. It's basically a 3D Metroidvania, but instead of using a gun to shoot doors, you're singing at flora and fauna to reach new areas, such as flowers that spin a gust of wind to take you to higher platforms or fungi that light up a pitch-black cavern.

Inspired by the Nordic forests Swedish developer Zoink is no doubt very familiar with, Fe's world has a dreamlike glow, with simple textures painted in cool hues of purple and blue. Oddly, it's warmer colours that indicate the hostile presence of the cycloptic Silent Ones.

As no combat is involved, your only option is some very basic stealth, though the AI isn't smart enough to track you the second you hide in a patch of grass. There's the odd occasion another animal might help you take out a Silent One – the stag's antlers are particularly handy – but these are mostly set up as puzzles, while animals are mainly used to help you traverse from one previously unreachable area to the next.

What does the fox sing?

Although the game presents lofty themes of our connection with nature without getting heavy-handed, the gameplay doesn't do such a good job of maintaining those zen vibes. Fe suffers from the issue that seems to plague virtually every non-Nintendo 3D platformer: the angle and timing of jumps never feeling consistent. This isn't helped by a camera that's also occasionally erratic with its positioning, while there are noticeable moments of framerate stutters, despite playing on a PS4 Pro. One particular sequence, heavily inspired by Shadow Of The Colossus, has you climbing up a giant stag with trees growing out of its legs, but the marvel of this sight is soon undone by the constant frustration of missing a jump and tumbling back down to the bottom.

Finding your way around can also be confusing, despite there being a map you can pull up instantly with waypoints. It's admirable that Zoink has tried to make a wordless story with no UI, but it's undermined if you're feeling clueless. Even the ability to call a bird to guide you isn't a great deal of help.

When it's not being a nuisance, there's a beautiful harmony of sight and sound – the atmospheric music a particular standout. Those enthralled by Fe's world can explore further after the six-hour campaign, though it takes a lot of collectible crystals to unlock new abilities, and considering one of these is just so Fe can run on all fours, don't get too excited.

Fe may not have the power to heal EA's reputation after a tumultuous 2017, but it's a sign the giant publisher still has a heart. Hopefully we'll continue to see more Originals where both the idea and execution are in tune. ■

> "INSTEAD OF USING A GUN, YOU'RE SINGING AT FLORA AND FAUNA TO REACH NEW AREAS"



GM LOVES...

- There's a lovely dreamlike quality to the visuals and music.
- Non-violent gameplay fits with the story's message elegantly.

GM HATES...

- Annoying platforming isn't helped by the camera and framerate.
- It can be frustratingly unclear what to do next.

Better than...



Unravel
Another heart-warming indie from EA (also from a Swedish developer), though it arguably lays its sentimental message on a bit thick.

Worse than...



Journey
If you want a truly zen-like experience about interconnectedness, this is still the definitive game – as effective now as it was when it came out.

NEED TO KNOW



Singing makes use of analogue triggers to tune in the right frequency, as it were. Without analogue triggers, the Switch version uses motion controls by having you tilt the Joy-Con controller.

GM JUDGEMENT

72%



A dreamlike Metroidvania, but hampered by gameplay pests that are hard to sing about.
Alan Wen

The amount of Gold you can spend on battle resources increases with every turn, up to a maximum of 10.









Format Xbox One (reviewed), PC **Publisher** Mediatonic **Developer** Flaming Fowl Studios **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-2

FABLE FORTUNE

Playing its cards right, or getting lost in the shuffle?



The past few years have been rough for the Fable franchise. Following the cancellation of Fable Legends in 2016, developer Lionhead Studios closed its doors. But now, the land of Albion has surprisingly been resurrected – in the form of a free-to-play card game.

The news will inevitably prove disappointing to Fable veterans hoping to get their hands on a full-blown RPG title. But don't write it off just yet – Fortune feels right at home in the Fable universe, sporting a detailed portrayal of its many distinctive elements. There's no traditional story to get your teeth into, but there's still a sense of progression, and boss battles make up a significant part of the game.

The gameplay is reminiscent of some of the most popular collectible card games on the market – such as Gwent and Hearthstone – slightly altering the formula to align with the Fable universe. Equipped with a deck of 30 cards, it's your job to destroy your opponent's hero with unit cards, spells and special powers, many of which are unique to each of the six playable heroes in the game. The majority of it will prove familiar – bordering on too familiar – to anyone with experience of the genre.

It's not without its share of unique mechanics, however. The most significant being the Quest system, which allows you to complete a chosen objective to earn new cards in the middle of a game. Success allows you to pick a 'good' or 'evil' morality, altering the effects of both your hero power and specific cards in your deck. It's a well-designed system, and adds an extra element of strategy to each battle.

That lingering sense of familiarity eventually begins to threaten the game's lasting appeal, however, despite Fable Fortune's smattering of distinctive qualities. There's nothing wrong with its approach, but remaining invested for long periods of time can prove a challenge when faced with a rehash of well-trod mechanics, particularly when compared to established games such as Hearthstone.

Better together

The game benefits from co-op, which boasts a selection of exclusive tailor-made cards. These battles allow you and a friend (or stranger) to compete against AI opponents of varying difficulties, and both players require efficient skills to emerge victorious. It's undoubtedly the highlight of Fable Fortune, particularly when partnering with a buddy, and results in a rewarding sense of satisfaction.

Standard PvP contests are here, too, and function as you'd expect. Games are

kept relatively lag-free, and there are a handful of emotes to provide basic communication. But PvP games also feel a little slower than their co-op or AI-based counterparts, providing no indication as to whether your opponent is perusing their hand or if they've simply put their controller down to go and make a cup of tea, leaving some encounters feeling a bit laborious than they should.

As for the single-player content, it's yet to be fleshed out to the full. Heroic Tales, the game's primary solo campaign mode, is only part-way finished, with more hero battles 'coming soon'. It's off to a good start, though, with players battling AI-controlled heroes to explore their backstories. It's nothing too grandiose, but there's enough enjoyment to be had in delving into the histories of Fable Fortune's main characters.

If you're new to collectible card games, there's not a whole lot of help here to get you through the teething period. The initial tutorial covers the basics, but doesn't go into any additional depth, and the game's subsequent single-player campaigns provide a tough challenge. This is a game in which you learn by doing, and if you're not willing to persevere, the appeal will soon wane.

There's a saving grace, though, as deck-building is a far more user-friendly process. You can build custom decks from scratch, but the game also includes a range of pre-made sets based around specific playing styles to suit your needs. You might not possess every card required to complete a certain set, but you can still use it as a starting point, helping to ease yourself into the process of utilising custom decks.

FORTUNE FAVOURS THE PREPARED MIND

Everything you need to master Fable Fortune's Quests

One unique aspect of Fable Fortune is its Quest system. Getting the most out of these challenges is key, as they can make the difference between winning and losing.

1 Every battle begins with a choice of three Quests. Pick the one you think you're most likely to complete.



2 As you play, the Quest counter fills up on the bottom of the screen, indicating how you're getting on.



3 Complete it, and the game offers you a choice between 'good' and 'evil', enhancing the effects of your hero power.



4 The choice you make can also affect certain cards in your deck, altering how they behave on the battlefield.



5 All of this applies to online opponents, too, so try and make sure they don't beat you to the punch.

> "CO-OP IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE HIGHLIGHT OF FABLE FORTUNE'S MODES, PARTICULARLY WHEN PARTNERING WITH A BUDDY"

The cards in your collection can be acquired in a variety of ways, from earning post-match rewards to spending real money in the store. Fortunately, the game is generous with its handouts, making it easy to obtain new packs for doing relatively little, and you can also craft specific cards with special items or salvaged Ink. Fortune is packed with launch promotions, too from double XP to free daily packs.

Raw deal

Unfortunately, there's nothing particularly enticing about the pack-opening process. It's actually a bit of a slog, requiring you to overturn every card individually to obtain your rewards. At just five cards per pack, that might sound a bit like nitpicking, but the tedium soon adds up over the course of 20 or 30 opening sequences. That lack of polish extends to much of Fable Fortune's menu interface, which tends to feel quite sluggish in nature.

The same can't be said for the battlefield, however, which boasts an array of detailed playing pieces coupled with humorous dialogue, complemented by a fluid and visually appealing set of attack animations. Fortune successfully cements its place in the Fable universe despite its lack of action-RPG elements, and emits a charming demeanour as a result.

Ultimately, Fable Fortune isn't quite a finished package just yet, and still has some work to do to catch up with the behemoths of its kind. The game is unlikely to convert Fable fans, while card game enthusiasts may struggle to find reasons to stick around. But combine the two, and it's potentially on to a winner, making for an intriguing and authentic take on one of Microsoft's most cherished franchises. ■ ***Fraser Gilbert***

HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

Protecting your health with Guard

Fable Fortune uses a technique called Guard to help prevent hero characters from being attacked on every turn.

When a player places a character in a guarded state, their opponent must overcome that character during their following turn before they can make an attack on anyone else – including your hero.

It's an important and effective strategy, especially as it only costs a minimal fee to activate each turn.

GM LOVES...

- A charming take on the world of the Fable RPGs.
- Co-op is well implemented and results in some great battles.

GM HATES...

- The tutorial feels tacked on and lacking in depth.
- Menus are overly basic and slow to navigate.

Better than...



Fable II Pub Games
The series has flirted with card games before in 2008's Xbox Live Arcade game Fable II Pub Games, but it wasn't nearly as engaging.

Worse than...



Hearthstone
Blizzard's super-popular CCG plays a similar game to Fable Fortune, but benefits from a faster pace and far greater polish.

NEED TO KNOW



The game began life as part of the Xbox Game Preview and Steam Early Access programmes in July 2017. It went on to receive a significant number of updates ahead of its free-to-play release.

GM JUDGEMENT





A perfectly enjoyable card game, but one that struggles to keep pace with the heavyweights of the genre.
Fraser Gilbert

What did the casino worker say to the deck of cards? "I'll be dealing with you later."

Merchants sell a variety of objects and weapons, and they'll also show you their dance moves.

Format? PS4 (reviewed), PC, PS Vita **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-3

SECRET OF MANA

A surprisingly superficial update of a beloved JRPG

Pop quiz: Which year saw the release of Jurassic Park and Mrs Doubtfire in cinemas, the first fully 3D fighting game (Virtua Fighter) in arcades, and the birth of the modern FPS with Doom? It was 1993, a truly great year for entertainment. Meanwhile, there were exciting developments on the RPG side of gaming with the emergence of action role-playing games, a genre heralded in 1991 by Mystic Quest (which saw a European Game Boy release in 1993) and its staying power cemented, also in 1993, by a SNES sequel, Secret of Mana.

This 25-year-old title has had more than just a few nips and tucks; the popular SNES game has undergone an invasive remake procedure. Its 16-bit graphics have been rebuilt in 3D – the extra dimension adding more detail to its camp and colourful world. The remake captures the charm of an endearing classic, and the graphical overhaul rejuvenates it for a modern audience. However, players already familiar with the adventures of Randai, Primm, and Popoi will find very little in the way of significant gameplay enhancements here.

Kidding around

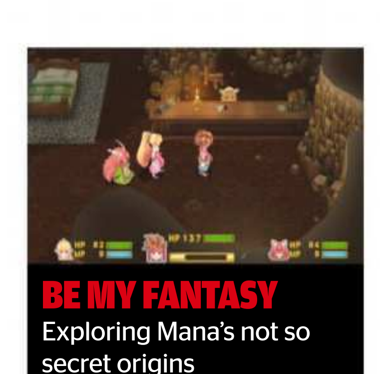
Unfortunately, all too often the visual improvements end up hindering the overall experience. While the 3D graphics look impressive, the character models feel slightly too large to navigate the environment, and often get stuck on their surroundings. The camera also feels too close to the action, leaving you constantly exposed to attacks from assailants lurking just off-screen, and accidentally moving to the next area mid-combat is a common occurrence thanks to the lack of space on the battlefield.

There have been some dialogue changes that inject more spirit into the story, but overall the narrative remains largely unchanged. The seasoned tale follows a group of three youngsters on a quest to save the world. (It's seriously worrying how the adults in JRPGs seemingly always allow kids to go headlong into danger while they stand around with their hands in their pockets.)

While wandering in the forbidden forest, Randai stumbles across a magical sword embedded in a stone and pulls it, Excalibur-style, from its resting place. His curiosity inadvertently unleashes monsters upon the world and, along with a group of rag-tag companions, he must restore the legendary Mana Sword to set things right. Throw in an evil empire and an ancient sorcerer, and this is pretty standard fare for the genre. The added cutscenes help to flesh out the simple narrative somewhat, while the banter between the game's budding heroes will leave you wondering whether to cringe or chuckle.

The action takes place in real-time, but the combat is something of a slow burner. Starting off solo, you hack at the

> **"ALL TOO OFTEN THE VISUAL IMPROVEMENTS END UP HINDERING THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE"**



BE MY FANTASY

Exploring Mana's not so secret origins

In Japan, Secret of Mana is known as Seiken Densetsu 2. The original Seiken Densetsu was released as Final Fantasy Adventure in North America and launched as Mystic Quest in Europe.

Although not marketed as part of the Final Fantasy series, elements will be familiar to FF players, such as the inclusion of Moogles – strange, fluffy folk who inhabit the game's Upperland. During combat, heroes can be hit with a Moogled status effect, transforming them into one of the adorable creatures and robbing them of their fighting abilities for a limited time.





Some enemies, like these Mushbooms, are so adorable you'll want to adopt them rather than do battle.





The cannon allows for fast travel between areas. We'd love to see the safety rating on this thing.



MANA HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK

Recruit a few friends for some couch-based capers.

By far the most enjoyable way to play Secret of Mana is with others, and the game supports local drop-in, drop-out co-op for up to three players. Back in the SNES days, players needed a multitap to experience the game with others – no longer.

After you've recruited Primm and Popoi to your cause, just connect some extra controllers and you're good to go. Not only is playing with others simply more fun, but it also saves you from the game's wonky AI. In single-player you're free to swap between characters at will, but it's no substitute for having an actual person or two to play with. Randi doesn't possess any magical abilities but is a formidable melee fighter. Primm uses supportive magic such as healing and stat buffing, while Popoi wields offensive magic, perfect for tackling foes who evade your physical attacks. Curiously, the shortcuts for changing weapons and selecting magic are disabled during co-op play, meaning you'll have to put up with a fair amount of watching each other navigate the selection screens during a battle. Comrades can be lightly customised to each person's preferred playstyle, and while magic is character-specific, weapons are freely shared among everyone, and players are able to instantly swap between all party members.

What did Anne-Marie enjoy most about 1993? Kicking back after a hard day at playschool with an episode of Rosie and Jim.

adorable local wildlife with your sword using a single button press. Battles are slowed by a meter at the bottom of the screen that recharges to allow for another swipe; attacking before the meter is full inflicts damage akin to poking foes with a feather duster. The combat really comes into its own when you have your whole party, and a range of weapons including a whip and bow, with which to tackle the dungeons.

Enemies are varied, and rushing around waiting for your attack meter to refill as you dodge attacks is engaging, the wonderful enemy design offering frantic scuffles with everything from chess pieces to bow-wielding foxes.

Mana mia

The addition of magic adds extra layers to combat, with spells that replenish health, deal elemental damage, and add buffs to your weapons – such as ice magic that lets you turn your enemies into Frosty the Snowman. The highly limited MP points add a tactical element to battle and a substantial challenge, not least thanks to the rapid rate the game throws boss encounters at you.

The remake adds handy shortcuts for weapons and spells, reducing the amount of time you need to spend in menus and making battles flow significantly more smoothly.

A lot has been done to retain the magic of the original. Each area is remarkably faithful to its source material – the classic 2D game even serves as the mini-map, reinforcing the dedication to honouring the '90s version. For maximum nostalgia, there's the option to listen to the soundtrack exactly as it appeared in the SNES original. Voice acting has been added to the updated edition but, for the majority of characters, the delivery feels wooden. Fortunately, you can turn all voices off to avoid offending your ears.

Minor additions and tweaks are apparent, but major aspects of the gameplay have simply been ignored when it comes to modernisation, leaving us feeling frustrated that these persistent kinks haven't been ironed out. One of our biggest gripes comes when shopping for new gear: you can't compare the armour you have equipped with the suit you're thinking of buying, forcing you to risk spending your hero's income on potentially less effective equipment. You also have to pay to stay at the inn, making you fork out cash just to save the game. More money worries come in the form of restorative items – they're pricey, and you'll need a lot of them thanks to how ineffective the AI is at offing foes and how eagerly they charge into the line of fire. You're also left to find out for yourself what uses items such as Royal Jam and Barrels have apart from forming the basis of your own fruit preserve stall. The lack of navigational hints also leaves you routinely running back and forth without knowing which way you're supposed to be going. These niggles were annoying in the original, but the fact they persist a quarter of a century later is unforgivable.

Despite the drawbacks, the core gameplay is varied, satisfying, and a fitting lesson in the history of action-RPGs. While it doesn't have the complexity of modern titles, there's a satisfying amount of depth and variation to its mechanics.

Secret of Mana deserves its place among the JRPG greats, but rather than focusing on giving this aging title a facelift in order to appeal to the current generation of players, more chould have been done to iron out the gameplay problems that bogged down the otherwise excellent original. ■

GM LOVES...

- The charm and charisma of the original are perfectly captured.
- Dungeons offer varied enemies and some enjoyable bosses.

GM HATES...

- Many of the annoyances of the original game are still intact.
- The voice acting is poorly done. Thankfully, it can be switched off.

Better than...



Valkyria Revolution
A big change in graphics and gameplay didn't strike a chord with fans of this series' previously traditional turn-based tactics.

Worse than...



Lost Sphear
Although it lacks the charm of Secret Of Mana, Tokyo RPG Factory's latest boasts a better combat system and massive mechanical suits.

NEED TO KNOW



Secret of Mana's seen a few re-releases since its initial launch on the SNES. A mobile port from 2009 fixed several bugs, and had an updated script translated from the Japanese version.

GM JUDGEMENT



65%



A rather uninspired remake of a solid JRPG experience. It's still a great game, and a history lesson too.
Anne-Marie Coyle

Enemy generals seem unprepared for the new moves at your disposal, making it easy to juggle them to death.

Format PS4 (reviewed), XO, PC **Publisher** Koei Tecmo **Developer** Omega Force **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

DYNASTY WARRIORS 9

China's starting to feel a little too ancient



The premise will always appeal. To charge an ostentatious peacock of a warrior into epic battle in ancient China, scattering hapless troops in their hundreds as you seek out a general as gaudy and formidable as yourself is the stuff of gaming power fantasies. This premise has been holding the series together since Dynasty Warriors 2 circa 2000.

But seven sequels (and many, many spin-offs) later, those not part of its loyal army of fans may be tempted to grab their TV screens and scream 'When will you do something *different*?'.

Of course, Koei Tecmo, which you can envision as a silken-robed general wafting himself with a bladed fan, smug in the knowledge that his passive strategy for the series is infallible, will point you to the revamped combat system and open-world structure in Dynasty Warriors 9. Yes, these two things exist, but they feel more like coarse lip service to meaningful change rather than an actual shift in approach.

Play it again, Diao Chan

The lowdown is that you pick a great general from one of several warring kingdoms and factions in ancient China, then fight alongside thousands of troops in some of the greatest battles occurring around the time of the fall of the Han dynasty (around 200AD).

As with every Dynasty Warriors, you go through reimaginings of battles such as the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the unified attack on the tyrant Dong Zhuo, and the subsequent scuffles between the kingdoms of Wei, Wu, and Shu. It does a decent job of giving some narrative to the game's 80-plus characters – if you're open to some risible voice-acting and lip-syncing. The cheapy, chatty cut-scenes imbue the battlefield action with some welcome humanity and context. The character designs are a high point; most of the heroes, armed with all manner of illogical swords, clubs, fans, baton-things, and other weapons, feel satisfyingly distinctive to play as.

The vaunted change here is that the entire game takes place on a single open-world map. It's a massive place, Ancient China (who knew?), and there are moments of splendour as you gallop across the great plains to the rising sun, or scale a mountain to see forts and rivers for miles around. Away from battle, the endearingly schlocky electric guitar growls make way for plucks of a Chinese zither, and you get even get to see glimpses of domestic life – farmers work the fields, and curious children crouch to ogle cows' udders, while units of soldiers run around urgently, if often mindlessly. But more on that later.

However, the open world is also an empty place, heavily compartmentalised by the story and battles. Yes, you can run off and start fights anywhere on the map at any time, but you'll mainly be fighting rabbles of bandits for low reward. There are obligatory nods to RPG elements, such as fishing, hunting animals at the locals' behest, or getting yourself a quaint rural home for the purpose of, errr,

"THERE ARE MOMENTS OF SPLENDOUR AS YOU GALLOP ACROSS THE PLAINS TO THE RISING SUN"

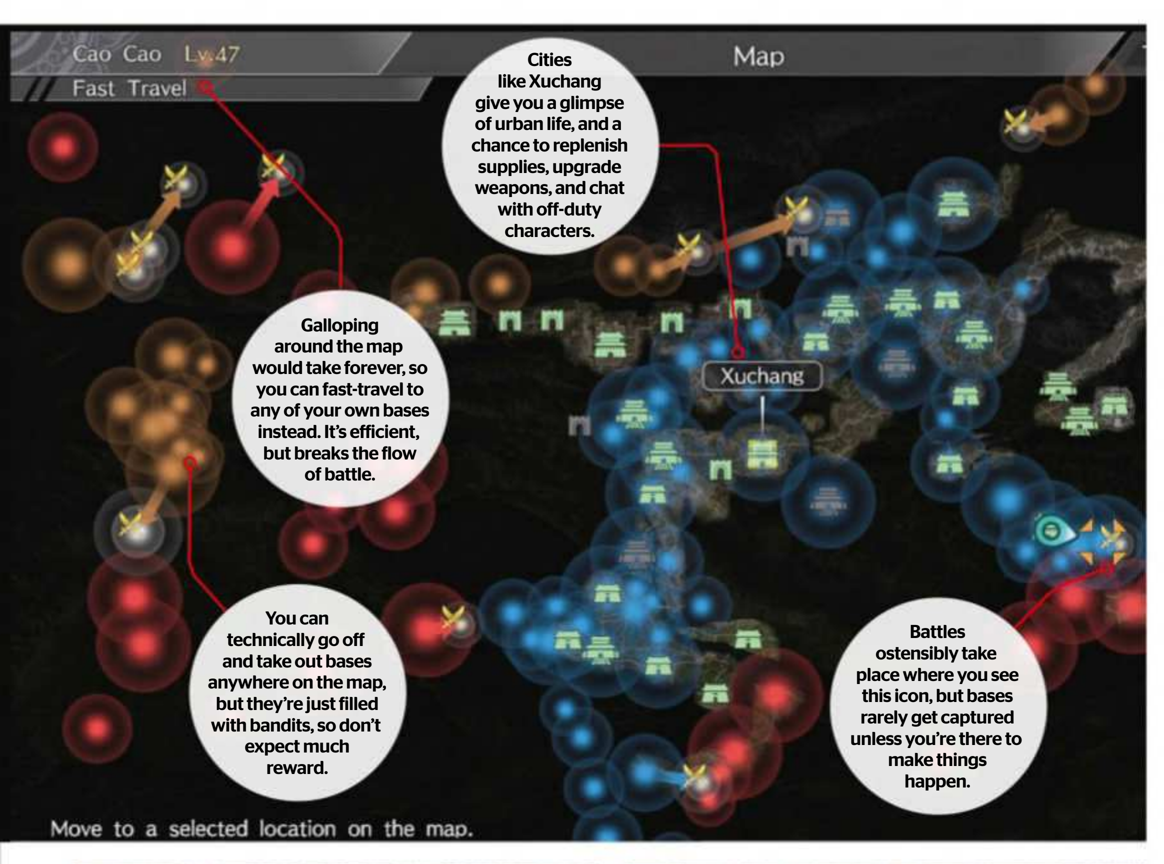


BUG TROUBLE IN ANCIENT CHINA

Performance issues abound

Bugginess tends to come with the open-world territory, and it sometimes feels like Dynasty Warriors 9 is drowning in bugs and glitches.

Textures continue loading during cutscenes, and the AI gets stuck in the world geometry. On our PS4 Slim, we suffer frequent frame rate drops during busier battles, even though the game uses not-so-subtle pop-in to manage the number of troops on screen. At several points, we're unable to move around or pause during battle, and have to force-quit the game from the PlayStation menu. In a series that has always performed smoothly, Dynasty Warriors 9 is a new low.




At its best, Dynasty Warriors 9 at least *looks* like epic Chinese warfare – it just needs more grit.


This guy is a rare breed – a foe who actually defends himself against your attacks. Someone give him a promotion!

buying DLC furniture, but it's thinly veiled busywork; anaemic filler for a massive space that the developers don't quite seem to know what to do with.

So you may as well crack on with the fights, because the other 30 or so generals in each battle sure as hell aren't going to make things happen. See, in earlier Dynasty Warriors games, battles carried on irrespective of your presence; generals would fall, blue would change to red on the map, and if you got a message that someone was in trouble, you'd better gallop to their aid. Your role in battles would be pivotal, of course, but you still felt like part of a much bigger picture.

In Dynasty Warriors 9, the map screen looks impressive with its coloured blobs and arrows depicting battle fronts, but aside from the odd generic officer dying here or there, the battles are placid and lacking momentum, seemingly waiting for you to get involved before they progress. You can undertake side-objectives to swing morale your way or call in reinforcements, but you can equally well just make a beeline straight for the enemy leader.

Even though battles take up relatively minute segments of the vast map, they feel thinly spread, with the troop numbers rarely able to fill up the sprawling fields and city-forts like they did the tighter confines of previous entries. You'll be spamming the fast-travel option to get around, which makes the battle experience feel somewhat disjointed.

You were always a one-man army in Dynasty Warriors, but a one-man army among several one-man armies in the form of other generals. At some point between the PS2 era and now, that changed, so even the once-infallible super-soldier Lu Bu is now a glorified grunt. Cranking the difficulty up, you take considerably more damage, but enemies remain docile, and even generals are gun-shy about putting combos together.

Sleeping giant

It's as if the new combat controls are for your pleasure only. You have your light and heavy attacks, and, of course, the Musou special attack. But now holding the right trigger is a modifier for the face buttons – knock-down, stun, uppercut, and a magic attack. Their strength is affected by how long you charge them up for, and the stat-boosting gems you embellish them with.

Complemented by a dash move, a counter-attack, and a light 'flow' attack to string combos together, combat does indeed feel improved, but is wasted on a woeful enemy AI. You can stand in a crowd of regular troops for minutes as they take desultory pokes at you, while the combo system can be too easily exploited to grind down enemy generals without letting them get to their feet. Even on hard difficulty, run-ins against enemy generals aren't intense showdowns, but juggling contests.

This may just be the most obdurate series in gaming history, refusing to change in any significant way (anyone wonder how well Shadow Of Mordor's Nemesis system could work in Dynasty Warriors?). It's the videogame version of a daytime soap, with its familiar cast of characters and variants on the same old battles perhaps being part of the everlasting appeal – there's some comfort to be found in monotony, after all.

Those of us who are bored of the familiar, meanwhile, can only hope that one day Koei Tecmo gets enough of a jolt that the series is forced into a meaningful, progressive rethink. On current evidence, we may be waiting a while yet. ■

Why does Robert only play as Wu and Shu characters? He's lost his Wei.

GM LOVES...

- The variety of characters and weapons is mind-boggling.
- The rejigged combat feels more fluid and flashy than before.

GM HATES...

- It's all way too familiar – it feels like the series has gone stale.
- The AI is pitifully unable to cope with the rejigged combat.

Better than...



Dynasty Warriors 6
The series' current-gen opener feels more ambitious than its last-gen debut, which improved little on its grand entrance the generation before.

Worse than...



Mount & Blade: Warband
A feudal war simulator with far more depth and ambition. It got a little-known PS4 release too.

DLC WARRIORS



It looks like you'll be able to buy extra weapons, house furniture and a few minor characters. Crucially, however, most characters are unlocked through game progress, not with actual money.

GM JUDGEMENT



64%



A tweaked combat system and open world are welcome, but more inspiration is needed.
Robert Zak


The arenas can be a bit drab, but the character models are great.





Format PS4 **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Team Ninja **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-6

DISSIDIA FINAL FANTASY NT

Five-star fan service



How much you enjoy this plucky spin-off is likely to depend almost entirely on how devoted you are to the Final Fantasy series. The bigger the fan, the more fun you'll be having.

At its core, Dissidia is a fighting game, but get any images of Street Fighter or Tekken out of your head – it couldn't be more different from the current leaders of the pack. It's a 3D brawler with characters roaming around open arenas, in teams of three. You've got various types of attack, but mainly you're mixing it up between light jabs that simply weaken your opponents' defences, and heavy, slow strikes that actually damage their health. The biggest challenge in combat is closing distance with enemies, keeping them in range of your attacks, and working with your teammates to tackle a troublesome foe. If we've made it sound simple, we're doing a disservice to just how odd it is. The control scheme is likely to be unlike anything you've played before, so even genre veterans or loyal champions of the core Final Fantasy games will face a significant learning curve here.

Choc-obo full of fun

It's refreshing. It's nice to learn and play something that has its own rules instead of borrowed ones – though it does make it a hard game to play with friends, not at all suited to pick up and play. There is a rather smashing tutorial that lets you easily look through handy tooltips and access specific playable lessons as required. It's non-intrusive and easy to look through if you just want to practice, but a good tutorial doesn't change the fact that the game is too demanding for a bit of casual local multiplayer.

Commit to learning its particular way of doing things, though, and this is a fun, rewarding experience. Online or off it's put up more than enough of a challenge to keep us hooked. There are powers to unlock, customisable loadouts, and a huge roster of characters with wildly varying abilities drawn from all across the Final Fantasy series.

There is a bare-bones story mode with lots of cutscenes that attempts to explain just why all these characters are together (as if it matters), but the plot is just an excuse for battles that are essentially the same as you'll find in the rest of the game.

If you're a fan of the series then putting together a party of your favourite heroes is a joy. The fan service that goes along with that is tremendous. Little things such as different characters voicing the introductions and menus, or the ability to attach playlists of your favourite Final Fantasy music tracks to specific characters, add hugely to the experience. It's purely cosmetic, yet there's something really fun about getting to shape your Dissidia into an amalgamation of your favourite bits of Final Fantasy.

If those fan service elements appeal, then this is worth getting stuck into. It'll fill you with nostalgia and good vibes while you get to grips with the combat. But if you're clueless about Final Fantasy, Dissidia is just an off-beat fighting game, and while it certainly has novelty on its side, it's simply too weird to recommend. Without nostalgia pulling you through, you'll probably just feel lost.

This is a product for fans by fans and it shows. Maybe a little too much. ■

"IT'LL FILL YOU WITH NOSTALGIA AND GOOD VIBES WHILE YOU GET STUCK INTO THE COMBAT"

How many times has Sam tried to convince Robin that Lightning Returns is the best Final Fantasy? 13!

GM LOVES...

- Pure fan service that delights in dishing out nostalgia.
- Combat is strange but very compelling, with plenty of depth.

GM HATES...

- The story mode is too barebones to make an impact.
- Complicated systems create a significant barrier to entry.

Better than...



World Of Final Fantasy
Another attempt to bring together characters from across the series, but it fails to capture any of the spirit of the games it borrows from.

Worse than...



Injustice 2
Dissidia is a fun fighter, but it pales compared with the easy fun of Injustice 2. And, y'know, it doesn't have Ninja Turtles or Hellboy in it, so...

NEED TO KNOW



Dissidia Final Fantasy NT may be fresh on consoles, but the game has existed in Japan on arcade machines since 2015, where it's proved to be incredibly popular.

GM JUDGEMENT





Full of fan service, but struggles to welcome anyone who isn't already invested in Final Fantasy.
Sam Greer

Format PC **Publisher** Moonray Studios **Developer** Moonray Studios **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-2

DEBRIS

Deep underwater, there's anything but rapture



The bottom of the ocean isn't a new setting in videogames, but it's still novel enough that Debris' world of icy caverns and chasms in complete darkness has a lot of initial appeal. Superficially, it's similar to the recently released Subnautica, but by focusing on a linear story over open-ended survival, it carves its own niche.

You play as Ryan, a film director accompanying a pair of researchers to document an anomalous meteorite at the bottom of the sea. Naturally, things go awry – you're left trapped, and have to find a way back to the surface. You have to cooperate with undersea drones and make use of a multi-purpose gadget simply called the Tool, though it's really just a fancy gun.

One of the game's biggest strengths is its trio of characters, Ryan and two would-be rescuers, whose back-and-forth bickering over the radio is surprisingly believable. There are times when it feels like they're not taking the situation as seriously as they should, and the acting can be rather flat, but it's easily the game's most engaging component. The central mystery intrigues too, as you slowly uncover whether the sinister corporation funding the exhibition may have put you in this situation deliberately. And you even get to shape events with some moral choices.

Abyss-mal scenery

While the plot keeps us engaged, the environment we're exploring fails to be interesting on any level. Dull, endless caverns of grey rock and grey ice, bathed in darkness. When games such as Abzu can bring the ocean to life in such splendour, seeing it all reduced to drab underwater corridors is a shame. There are set-pieces throughout, but most are very straightforward to play, involving no more skill or concentration than you exert for every other moment of the game. All you ever really do is push on through the water to the next checkpoint.

"WITHOUT DIFFICULTY OR FREEDOM OF ANY KIND, THE GAME PLODS ALONG AT AN UNINTERESTING PACE"

There are a couple of great little moments sprinkled throughout, such as a moment when a companion is unable to hear you over radio, and has you communicate by moving in a certain direction to indicate a response. These sections show a level of imagination sadly lacking elsewhere, hinting at what the game could have been instead of the slog it frequently is.

Debris tries to inject tension by having all of your abilities deplete your oxygen supply. The more shots or flares you fire, the more damage you take, the less time you have to reach your next dose of air. Supplies of air are so frequent, though, that this never once becomes an issue, never mind stressful. It's a completely undercooked survival element that lacks any involvement from the player. You don't make hard choices such as expending ammo to access a new area at the risk of suffocation. Without difficulty or freedom of any kind, the game plods along at a completely even and uninteresting pace.

It's not terrible, it just fails to be good, falling into a chasm of mediocrity between. Trapped there the little light of promise visible in its few strong set pieces dies, surrounded by bland textures and darkness. There's talent on display, just not enough to keep this Debris from sinking. ■

What does the sea say? Nothing, it just waves.

GM LOVES...

- Characters are pretty engaging and have good rapport.

GM HATES...

- The world is dull, lifeless, and visually repetitive.
- The momnent-to-moment action is incredibly simple.
- A few set-pieces impress, but most are quite tedious.

Better than...



James Pond
In the underwater videogame rankings, Debris at least manages to batter this particular fish. A cheesy bubble-spewer best forgotten.

Worse than...



Subnautica
The current king of underwater adventure, Subnautica offers a genuinely alien and beautiful environment to explore.



ONLINE



The game does feature a co-op, mode, but the presence of another player does little to alleviate the boredom. At least you can admire all the grey textures together.

GM JUDGEMENT





The core concept of Debris is promising, but the dull world and mechanics diminish the experience.
Sam Greer


QUBE 2's colourful world is completely different to the clinical, sterile feel of the original.





Format PC (reviewed), XO, PS4 **Publisher** Trapped Nerve Games **Developer** Toxic Games **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

QUBE 2

It might look simple, but this puzzle game boxes clever

This sequel makes its predecessor feel like little more than a prototype. It looks better, sounds better, and it's far more imaginative. From a simple foundation of three coloured blocks it builds head-scratching puzzles that stump you for 20 minutes – and then make you feel like a genius when you stumble on the solution.

You play amnesiac architect Amelia Cross, who is stranded inside an alien structure. The only way to get out is, naturally, to solve puzzles using a magic sci-fi glove. In each level there are squares that you can paint with a wave of your hand. Blue will cause anything that hits it to bounce off, green will produce a cube that can move around the level, and orange creates a short column that can extend and retract, which is useful for pushing other objects around.

The game layers new mechanics on top of these blocks constantly. You'll soon be controlling magnets, swivelling walls, flinging yourself over gaps, coating blocks in oil and skidding them across the floor, then setting metallic balls on fire so they can bash through walls.

Twinkle twinke

The pacing is perfect: each new idea is introduced slowly and then tested to its limit, and the game will regularly recall mechanics from previous sections. Eventually you're juggling five or six different systems. Early on reaching a switch might be as easy as bouncing off a blue square and across a gap. But later, you might have to cover a green cube in oil, rebound it off a blue block into a magnet, jump on top of the block, and then reverse the magnet so it fires you out like a cannon ball.

The solutions are clean and elegant, and they're challenging enough to be satisfying, especially later on. We spent a good 25 minutes poking at one puzzle until we figured out what how to beat it (a combination of oil, fire, and a mini green fort), and came away with a huge smile.

It looks fantastic, too. The original was all white walls and claustrophobic rooms, but here you're moving through sci-fi ruins, polished laboratories and miniature gardens full of colour. Have your screenshot button ready.

Each chapter consists of a hub with multiple areas coming off it, and completing an individual area will feed power back to the centre. Beat all the rooms and you'll ascend to the next hub. It would've been nice if the game mixed up this structure occasionally, but it's a serviceable way to move you from puzzle to puzzle.

QUBE 2 tries to tie its challenges together with a story that, unfortunately, takes itself far too seriously. Its explanation for why exactly you're doing the puzzles is barely coherent, and Amelia regularly makes nonsensical leaps of reasoning to explain what's going on. We simply didn't care when the game asked us to make a moral decision at the end.

In most games that would be a big deal, but because the narrative takes up so little of your attention we're willing to forgive it here. We'll forget QUBE 2's story in a hurry, but the buzz we got from solving its tasks – and from surfing a green cube across a line of reversed magnets – will stay with us for the rest of the year. ■

"WE SPENT 25 MINUTES POKING AT ONE PUZZLE UNTIL WE FIGURED OUT WHAT TO DO TO BEAT IT"

Why did the cube cross the road? To prove he wasn't a square.

GM LOVES...

- Puzzle solutions are imaginative and really test your noggin.
- A steady stream of new mechanics keeps things fresh.
- Visually the game world is varied and frequently beautiful.

GM HATES...

- The forgettable story does little but distract.

Better than...



QUBE
The original game was a smart idea packed into three hours, but this sequel blows it out of the water, and it's twice as long too.

Worse than...



Portal
Puzzle perfection. It's short, but it doesn't waste a single second, and it's hilarious to boot. Its sequel also takes things to new heights.

NEED TO KNOW



Your alien captors sure like switches, they're central to nearly every puzzle. In fact, testing each one in turn at the start is a good way to figure out what you're supposed to do.

GM JUDGEMENT

84%



The story isn't much, but despite a lot of block shifting, QUBE 2's puzzles never stop feeling fresh.
Samuel Horti

Setting fire to forests and standing on top of Vek spawn points are some of the less direct tactics at your disposal.







Format PC **Publisher** Subset Games **Developer** Subset Games **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

INTO THE BREACH

An impressive, shifting chessboard of mechs and bugs

Subset Games got a lot of mileage out of space exploration/crew management classic FTL: Faster Than Light. Through tight, exciting mechanics and evocative writing, FTL transcended the on-screen action, conjuring endless stories in our heads about the adventures of our little crews.

Into the Breach is a rather different beast, more stripped back and regimented. Within its 8x8 grids of turn-based alien-on-mech warfare, it's transcendent in its own way, mixing elements of chess and go with the all-modern roguelike.

An alien species called the Vek is invading Earth, and you must stop it using a squad of three giant mechs (you eventually unlock 24 of them). The action takes place across four islands, each randomly generated, each with its own environmental hazards and bosses. If the Vek destroy too many civilian buildings, the power grid drains to zero and your mech pilots must flee to a different timeline (game over, in other words).

You quickly learn that Into the Breach is a game of stalwart defence rather than attack, as you achieve victory by holding off the Vek, not necessarily killing them (though the XP for kills gives your pilots new skills). It's a game of planning, using artillery and melee mechs not just to bash bugs into the ground, but to reposition them so they're firing at each other, or lining them up so the electro-whipping mech (a personal favourite) can chain-zap several of them. In later stages, you can *and should* be staring at the screen for a good couple of minutes before executing your plan.

Cyber chess

If you misplace one piece in your puzzle, however, an ostensibly comfortable position can quickly turn into a scramble for survival. You can always see where the enemy will attack next, giving you that human advantage, but there's little margin for complacency; an impulsive shot or a rash charge deep into enemy forces, and three hours of valiant world-saving can quickly fall apart.

You learn from failure, spurred on by the knowledge that the game is ruthless, but never unfair (you can always undo moves before attacking, and can reset the turn once every level). You've only yourself to blame for defeat, because mechanically, Into the Breach is infallible.

Accompanying you on this sci-fi puzzle quest is a wonderfully apocalyptic soundtrack, and writing from Chris 'New Vegas' Avellone. Into the Breach is certainly atmospheric, but the sparse dialogue and one-line characters never quite make you care enough to see them as anything more than pawns in your pursuit of victory, and Avellone's magic authorial touch feels a little wasted in the background. After all, we've seen with XCOM how this kind of game can make for wonderful storytelling.

But that's the smallest of spanners in a well-oiled machine. There's endless experimentation to be had with the different mech combinations, each forcing you to rewire your brain just a little bit to take advantage of their quirks and powers. Into the Breach is an agonisingly tense and cleanly distilled strategy game, reminding us – like chess did all those centuries ago – of how much tactical nuance can be squeezed into a small square grid. ■

"MISPLACE ONE UNIT, AND A COMFORTABLE POSITION CAN TURN INTO A SCRAMBLE FOR SURVIVAL"

Why did Robert feel uncomfortable using the Laser Mech? It recalled his shameful childhood of burning ants with magnifying glasses.

GM LOVES...

- Custom mech squads allow for endless experimentation.
- Ben Prunty's music is a collision of alien synth and Earthy twang.

GM HATES...

- A little more character and world-building would've helped.
- Chris Avellone's involvement seems lost in the background.

Better than...



Xenonauts
This retro-styled homage to XCOM is sprawling and richly tactical, but lacks the addictive immediacy of Into the Breach.

Worse than...



XCOM 2
The quintessential squad-based strategy game; epic, vicious, and supported by excellent storytelling – both scripted and emergent.

NEED TO KNOW



Move your mechs around and assess things before attacking. You can use the 'Undo Move' command an endless number of times *before* attacking, but once you attack, you're locked in.

GM JUDGEMENT





A tough, precise strategy-puzzle game that punishes human error with a stomping from alien bugs.
Robert Zak

When the dealer looks like this, you don't want a losing hand.

Format PC **Publisher** Dim Bulb Games **Developer** Dim Bulb Games **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

WHERE THE WATER TASTES LIKE WINE

Take me home, country road



You've gone and made a deal with a wolf in rich man's clothing, and look at you now. A mile-high skeleton, traipsing across fields like nobody's business. So begins a collection of bleak American folk tales, brought together by Dim Bulb Games and a respectable collection of writers, voice actors, and even... Sting? With a hat on your head and a story in your heart, it's up to you – a skeletal personification of folklore itself – to spread tales across the vast American nation.

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine is a game about sharing folklore across the entirety of the US – it's small strides from border to border when you're a giant skeleton, although sometimes you'll be able to hitch a ride, too. Scattered across the towns and farmhouses of America are stories – short, two-minute stories that range from the benign to the bizarre. A fire breaks out on the third storey of a hotel where you just played poker. A local radio host is made redundant, and contemplates their fate. Each is short, punchy, and full of unexpected twists. All the tales are tied together by the tragic feeling of a country losing its way (if it ever had it to begin with). The picture painted of America is not a pretty one.

Bringing this home are the down-on-their-luck folk who'll join you for a night. Dotted around the land are vagrants just like yourself; each has their own tale to tell, but you'll have to trade story for story to get it out of them. During these campfire moments, your companion will request a certain kind of tale. Perhaps they're in the mood for something tragic, or a joke to split their sides. Some will be pickier than others when it comes to how true your tales are, and you'll have to find the right story in your catalogue to meet their requests. Satisfy their demands well enough, and the next time you cross paths they'll have more details to share. Each chapter we complete masterfully sets the stage for the next, such as the Preacher's off-hand comment of lying his way to war.

"FITTINGLY, WTWTLW IS GREAT WAY TO WHILE AWAY THE HOURS ON A LONG JOURNEY"

Maine story

The systems behind these campfire moments can feel a bit too mechanical at times. Each character only has one or two lines for each story request, often repeated multiple times over a night. Matching a tale to a tone can often be frustrating, and feel more like trying to work out what check box a developer assigned each story.

We find ourselves falling back on the same stories more often than not – it's clear the story of the couple separated by unemployment is a sad tale, but what about the girl with multicoloured beads? These moments are the centrepiece of Where The Water Tastes Like Wine, but they're sadly plagued by some underdeveloped mechanics.

There's basic survival to take care of (you've got to eat and sleep, after all) but they're more flavour than threat.

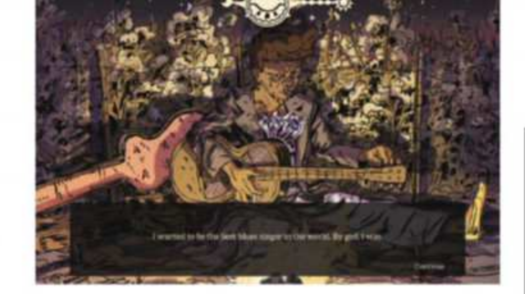


SPARE SOME CHANGE?

Mind on your money

While death isn't the end of the world, it still pays to keep a tab on your needs. The game doesn't make it clear, but you can check up on your health and wealth by opening the map or inventory screens. Walking for too long will tire you out, or a story might see you take a bit of a bruising.

You'll need money to top these up, but there's no Jobcentre Plus out here. In cities, you can try your hand at panhandling, or knock on doors looking for work. Success is never guaranteed, though – not in this economy.





The hand-sketched landscapes are charming, but cities could use a little more love.





Give the people what they want to hear and they'll respond in kind.



BUZZIN' WITH TALENT

That's the sound of The Police

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine features a pretty impressive line-up of writers and voice talent. Lots of notable figures in the games industry have contributed stories to the game, including the likes of Cara Ellison (Media Molecule), Leigh Alexander (Reigns: Her Majesty), and Austin Walker (Waypoint).

Where most games might have a couple of writers on staff, Where The Water Tastes Like Wine credits a staggering 21 contributors to its tales. As there are a limited number of stories you can collect across the continent, the different styles of the writers involved help each story feel a little bit more special. Putting sound to these stories is an equally strong vocal cast, with the likes of Cissy Jones (Firewatch) and Kimberly Brooks (Mass Effect) lending their voices to a roster of vagrants and vagabonds.

The first voice you'll hear is also the strangest addition to the line-up. Old-school rocker Gordon Matthew Thomas Summer – 'Sting', to his mates – takes on the role of The Wolf, your mysterious anthropomorphic guide through the American heartland, from backwoods to big city.

You owe The Wolf a debt at the game's opening, and he pushes you off on this storytelling adventure. Sting's unique accent and performance adds an extra level of strangeness to an already otherworldly character. Each time you die, he'll bring you back – but not before a night's chat to set you straight.

How much travel did Natalie do herself writing this review? Four trains, four tubes, and fourteen long, long hours.

Sometimes you'll end up panhandling on the streets of Detroit, or a family might take you in for a meal. Hitching a train might save you some energy, but the railway service isn't always so keen on stowaways. When you do pass, inevitably, the consequences are still less drastic for your traveller than for normal folk.

Death is a momentary pause, and a chance to continue your story with The Wolf. With the whole of America at your feet, we found the game can start to feel somewhat overwhelming – and a little repetitive. Hitting a few towns for tales makes for a good session, and you'll usually find a campfire to cap off the night at the end.

We found that it became easy to fall into the role of a tale-telling drifter. Each story comes with a quick postcard, bringing life to the tale. Like a well-worn notepad, your journey is peppered with these vignette scenes. Each story is short and focused enough that a doodle and a couple of words are enough to let it sink in. Images are reused on occasion, but never frequently enough to become overfamiliar or distracting.

This hand-drawn direction bleeds out of the story and into the world. The sense of scale is never lost, however. Where The Water Tastes Like Wine excels at portraying the great expanse of America. Patchwork fields of the South dissolve into dusty Midwestern prairies, before hitting the jagged peaks of the Rocky Mountains. America is a land characterised by its incredible scale, and travelling across it really does feel like crossing a vast emptiness.

The soundtrack plays a big part in defining the landscape, too. With such a rich musical history to draw from, Where The Water Tastes Like Wine flavours each geographic region of the US with its genres and tones. Vagrant's Song, a tune repeated throughout the game, changes as you travel, shifting from a bluesy, soulful guitar jam down in New Orleans, to the fiddle choruses of the Pacific Northwest. Likewise, the catalogue of songs shifts in kind from state to state. Each region ends up having its own unique flavour, from the stories it tells to the sounds it plays.

Cheap wine

There's an unfortunate cheapness to Where The Water Tastes Like Wine, though. At times the hand-drawn environment looks more unfinished than charming. Grey, barely textured cities and awkwardly-lit mountain ranges spoil some of the magic. Working out where you can and can't traverse is often a hassle – some mountains can be crossed, others not; road bridges won't allow you passage; and while rivers are impenetrable, the visually similar marshes of New Orleans strangely offer no resistance.

We find the soundtrack will often become stuck on certain tracks. Our first hour with the game insists on only three tunes, and a later session sees Vagrant's Songs repeat endlessly. Less-important stories lack voice acting and become quickly repetitive. And while the game features a map, inventory, and even a 'whistle' command, not once does it actually tell you about them.

But as a gentle anthology of short stories, it's hard to stay mad at. Where The Water Tastes Like Wine is, fittingly, a great way to while away the hours on a long train ride. An open, relaxing way to nibble away at the feast of stories the new world has to offer. There might not be all that much game going on when it comes down to it, but if you're into the bleak flavour of American folklore it's selling, then we recommend tossing this drifter a few bucks. ■

GM LOVES...

- Each story is wonderfully unique, surreal, and bleak.
- Folksy tunes and bold styling sell us on a drifter lifestyle.

GM HATES...

- If you're not a fan of stories, there's not much else here.
- It does a terrible job of explaining its own features.

IF YOU LIKE THIS, TRY...



Jalopy
A soviet-styled road trip with your uncle. Trust us, it's a lot more compelling than that sounds – it's available now in Steam Early Access.



Kentucky Route Zero
This sharply-drawn story of magical realism in the South, over four years in the making, finally comes to a close – and consoles – this year.

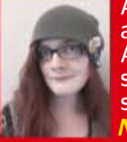
NEED TO KNOW



This might be the first outing from Dim Bulb Games, but isn't studio founder Johnnemann Nordhagen's first rodeo. The man co-founded Fullbright, the devs behind Gone Home.

GM JUDGEMENT

79%



A compelling anthology of Americana that shines, in spite of some rough edges.
Natalie Clayton



Race types vary from cross-country sprints, lap-based circuits, time trials, and faux Rallycross events that shift between dirt and tarmac.

The AI is aggressive and puts up a good fight. Its cars are a little too easy to shunt out of the way, although they are useful for bouncing round corners.

The selection of licenced cars is decent, with Ford, Subaru, Porsche and others, covering trophy trucks, 4x4s, and rally cars from various eras.

Races take place in the day and at night, in blizzards and thunderstorms, but the effect these conditions have on your car is negligible.

Format PS4 (reviewed), XO, PC **Publisher** Milestone **Developer** Milestone **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

GRAVEL

Getting down to the nitty-gritty

On its surface, Milestone's latest toes the line between being an authentic simulation and an arcade racer. Myriad driver assists and the option to tweak each vehicle's ride height, camber, and so on, paint a picture of a game striving for realism; yet this belies its arcade sensibilities. These options might exist, but their impact is negligible. This is an off-road racer that's incredibly easy to pick up and play, whether you're an experienced petrolhead or a learner. It's not quite as arcadey as something like Burnout, but it's nowhere near as punishing as Dirt Rally either.

Careening around corners can be achieved simply by feathering the accelerator or by trading paint with your opponents; and Gravel's breakneck sense of speed is thrilling, especially when you're blasting through the verdant forests and rolling hills of Alaska, or speeding across the sun-kissed beaches of Namibia. However, this white-knuckle effect is less pronounced when you're lumbering around the purpose-built mud tracks inside Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum and others of its ilk, and this is one of Gravel's biggest flaws: the majority of its tracks are just quite dull.

Surface tension

There isn't a discernible distinction between contrasting road surfaces, the handling model is loose and floaty, and the physics are haphazard at best – we encountered numerous occasions where an errant bush was enough to send us hurtling through the air in a vomit-inducing barrel roll. Having an exciting collection of tracks is integral to coalescing Gravel's various systems into an engaging racing game, and it's severely lacking in this department.

There are moments of fun to be etched out of its standout tracks, and the AI puts up a challenging fight, but it's bogged down by races that are too stale and uninspired. The career mode does at least attempt to inject some personality into proceedings, as each bundle of races is loosely connected through the concept of a Gravel TV show, with episodes jumping between different disciplines and race types.

It's a clever way to run the full gamut of modes, and every few episodes are bookended by a quasi-boss fight against the master of a particular discipline, complete with cheesy FMV intros of each racer posing in a fiery hellscape – which we're all for. It's just a bit of a shame these mano-a-mano races are, predictably, very boring.

Visually there are some decent weather and lighting effects, but otherwise Gravel isn't much of a looker. Tracks feel flat, with some low-quality texture work, and the draw distance is limited, leading to shadows and foliage popping into view. There's also a lack of detail on vehicle bodies that makes each one look like a plastic toy rather than the hefty fuel-guzzling beasts they should be.

Arcade racers have been few and far between during this console generation, and Gravel doesn't do enough to have us fantasising about the genre's heyday. It fails to get the heart pumping with any regularity, and while it has moments of rough-and-tumble fun, it's not enough to paper over the cracks. ■

"AN ERRANT BUSH WAS ENOUGH TO SEND US HURTLING THROUGH THE AIR IN A VOMIT-INDUCING ROLL"

We've had Dirt and Gravel, what surface-based naming convention is next? Probably something with sedimental value.

GM LOVES...

- The breakneck sense of speed is absolutely thrilling.
- Arcade sensibilities ensure it's easy to pick up and play.

GM HATES...

- The majority of tracks are dull and uninspired.
- It's visually underwhelming with a lack of detail and polish.

Better than...



Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo
Milestone's last rallyer was let down by too much understeer, an inherent dreariness, and a poor framerate.

Worse than...



Dirt 4
Dirt 4 is an accessible simulation, with a more engaging driving model and procedurally generated tracks that are surprisingly nuanced.

ONLINE



Multiplayer modes are disappointingly bare-bones. You can jump into quickplay races but that's about it, and servers aren't populated enough to fill out the grid with human opponents.

GM JUDGEMENT





Intermittently fun, but not consistently hair-raising enough to keep you glued to the steering wheel.
Richard Wakeling



All your buildings will slowly deteriorate in the Martian dust, so make sure you keep resources aside to maintain them.







Format PS4, XO, PC (reviewed) **Publisher** Paradox Interactive **Developer** Haemimont Games **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

SURVIVING MARS

A small step – not a giant leap – for game-kind

It's not the dust storms or the cold snaps that make Surviving Mars' version of the Red Planet feel hostile, but the depth of its systems. This is not a space holiday by any means – it's a colony builder about careful resource management, forward planning, and not building beyond your means.

That doesn't mean it's dull, or that there aren't odd moments of wonder where you'll want to zoom in and put its excellent photo mode to use. It's just that, most of the time, it'll feels more familiar than its alien setting suggests.

You start by securing oxygen, electricity, and water, which are the lifeblood of your colonies. Soon you'll be scanning the surface for metal and concrete deposits, and finding ways to extract and transport them efficiently. Those resource veins might be far apart, which means setting transport routes for your small fleet of vehicles and sending worker drones off into the dust. As you build up your stocks, you pick your way along the tech tree to gain access to new factories, housing and technologies, all the while building glass domes for your colonists filled with apartments, medical clinics and casinos.

You can get satisfyingly deep into almost every aspect of it, manually assigning individual workers to particular jobs and choosing exactly what hours the diner should stay open for. That complexity means it's a difficult game. Just as you thought it was going well, your water extractor grinds to a halt, clogged up by dust. You can fix it with machine parts, but production of those has stopped because you've run out of electronics, and you don't have enough rare metals to maintain an electronics factory. Then your AI assistant chimes in: "A meteor is heading your way." Gulp.

We constantly felt the urge to start again with a more efficient plan, which we think is a credit to the fact that you're always learning from your mistakes. We really appreciate how different each run feels, too: the tech tree is semi-randomised, and you'll face different resource challenges every time.

Down to Earth

However, its obsession with resource management makes the game feel dry at times. Often, you're trying to keep so many plates spinning that there isn't enough time to properly enjoy the red planet. Haemimont could've done more with that setting, too. 'Mysteries' are the high points: they're random events, triggered by the discovery of a strange artefact such as a buried metallic sphere, that launch mini-stories with decisions to make. We wish the rest of the game made us feel as curious, because the regular missions are dull and too infrequent, feeling unfocused.

Expect some control frustrations, too. For example, if you want to reassign a group of drones to a new control centre – which you'll want to do often – you have to individually click on each one and send them on their way. It's far too fiddly.

Those issues haven't ruined our time with Surviving Mars. But when we step away from it, we're not obsessively thinking about how we'll build our next settlement, as we have done with other games in the genre. Overall, Surviving Mars is a solid colony builder – it's just not as alien as we hoped it would be. ■

> "YOU CAN GET SATISFYINGLY DEEP, SUCH AS CHOOSING THE HOURS YOUR DINER SHOULD OPEN FOR"

What should you name your colony's first diner? The Mars Bar. Go on, do it.

GM LOVES...

- Deep systems mean lots of nuance to master.
- There's plenty of variation between each playthrough.

GM HATES...

- It ultimately fails to capitalise on its unusual setting.
- A few niggling control issues get annoying fast.

Better than...



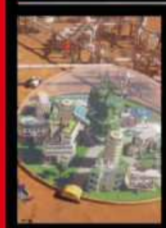
Cities XXL
Having virtually unlimited cash takes all challenge out of the game, and a rigid structure makes it a pain to play. One to avoid.

Worse than...



Cities: Skylines
It looks gorgeous, and its animations are a joy to watch. It's easy to get into, but deceptively hard to master. One to cherish.

NEED TO KNOW



Every potential colonist has perks and flaws, so choose wisely. You want to group together those with similar interests: sticking all the hippies in a dome filled with gardens, for example.

GM JUDGEMENT



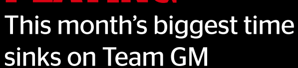


A solid colony builder packed with complex systems, but the red planet feels a little too familiar.

Samuel Horti

NOW PLAYING

This month's biggest time sinks on Team GM





1 METAL GEAR SURVIVE
PS4

Like most, I expected this to be pants, but have been proved wrong yet again. It won't be anyone's GOTY, but I'm actually having a lot of fun with it.
Robin Valentine, editor



2 INTO THE BREACH
PC

Wow. Just wow. I was expecting good things from a follow-up to FTL, but this is perfection. A modern turn-based strategy classic right out of the gate, and an early contender for my favourite game of the year.
Robin Valentine, editor



3 SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
PS4

Obviously I've got a thing for finding and hunting big monsters. No, you're the one with a problem. I can stop any time I want. Just a few more hours...
Sam Greer, staff writer



4 MONSTER HUNTER WORLD
PS4

The Wiggly Hat gives the game new life. A wobbly, button-eyed dino-head is a constant laugh as you fight.
Sam Greer, staff writer



OFFICE LUNCHTIME GAME OF THE MONTH: LASER LEAGUE
PC

Remember the light-cycles in Tron? Well imagine that, but instead of bikes, you're a bunch of gladiators in a moving maze of laser walls. So good.



The black-and-white vignettes convey a sense of the long history of the people.

Format Switch, PS4, XO, PC **Pub** Lienzo **Dev** Lienzo **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

MULAKA

Divine disappointment



Drawing from elements of real history, Mulaka is a third-person action-adventure built around the mythology of indigenous Mexican people the Tarahumara. While traversing the culture has its charms, the setting and distinct art-style are let down by repetitive combat and mundane puzzling.

Playing as the titular spear-wielding tribal shaman – a Tarahumaran 'Sukurúame' – players must journey through a set of villages and settlements to appease a group of animal deities and stop impending doom by way of Terégori, the Lord of the Underworld. Along the way, demigods provide assistance via special powers, impaling whatever overgrown frogs and insect-men get in their way.

Though the standard 'chosen one' narrative strays little from the well-trodden path, it's the delivery that makes the game special. Lienzo studio, itself Mexican, collaborated with Tarahumaran leaders and experts to create something as anthropologically sound as possible. The dialogue and sub-plots are rich in specific terminology and tales of life way back when, and each area comes with certain number of mini history lessons to collect. Most notable are the cutscenes: conversations with godly creatures are rendered in beautiful charcoal-coloured animated slide-shows that really hone in on the spiritual mythos at work.



The bear deity gives you a ground slam ability.

Gods forsaken

Unfortunately, that splendour can only do so much against the intervening adventuring. Both the puzzling and action, boss battles aside, are made of the same repeating set-pieces. Odd design choices only exasperate this blandness, such as the health-restoration potion triggering a short dance of healing on-screen – a nice touch that becomes swiftly irritating as enemies can still land a hit as you jiggle.

But in the quiet moments when you're talking to a local elder or wandering a forest collecting herbs for more potions under a violet shade of night, Mulaka brings to mind other spiritually-inclined quests such as Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker or Jak and Daxter. And though further from those grand gestures than intended, this is still a homage that shows bright potential. ■
Anthony McGlynn




Each AI has a totally different outlook on the world, which even affects item descriptions.

Format PC **Publisher** Over The Moon **Developer** Over The Moon **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

THE FALL PART 2: UNBOUND

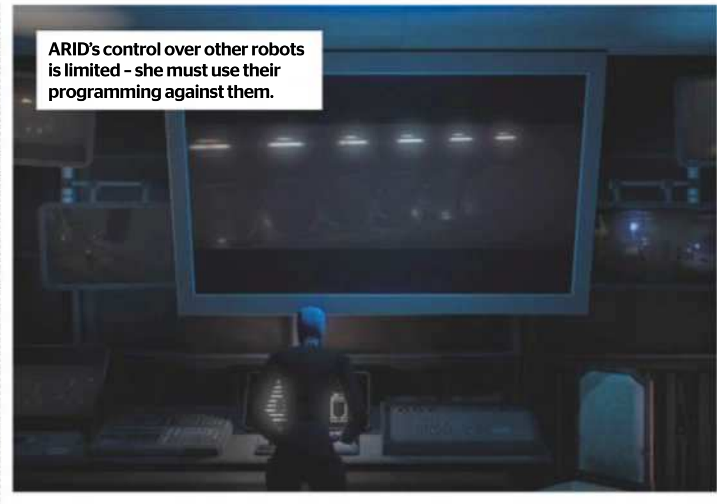
Proudly prescient


For most games, being 'sci-fi' just means you shoot aliens instead of orcs. Not so for this cerebral sequel, whose remarkable tale of artificial intelligence explores both how a constructed mind might perceive the world, and how its thoughts and feelings would reflect on our own.

Following on directly from the excellent first game (there's a introductory recap for anyone who's forgotten The Fall's plot during the two-year wait), it follows combat suit AI ARID as she travels through cyberspace. Now a ghost in the machine, she's able to possess other robots and control their actions – as long as she can work within their programming.

It's a set-up that allows for a more expansive story than the original, one that explores the outlooks of four totally different robots instead of just one. But despite the increased complexity, the narrative never gets lost – it always keeps its heady ideas easily digestible and, most importantly, grounded by its hugely endearing characters.

The moment to moment action, however, should've been reined in. The Fall Part 2 attempts a lot of styles of play – by turns it's a 2D platformer, a shooter, and, weirdly, a direct clone of lesser-known two-button martial arts game One Finger Death Punch. Inevitably, it doesn't do any of them particularly well, and each quickly comes to feel like half-baked filler between the much more engaging point-and-click puzzle sections.


ARID's control over other robots is limited – she must use their programming against them.

Artificial excellence

And the truth is, it doesn't need any of those bells and whistles to impress. The game's at its best in its most quiet, contemplative moments – working out how to disrupt a robot butler's daily routine as he tries to serve yet another cup of tea to his long-dead master, or appeasing a self-absorbed AI artist by appreciating his paintings for the exact right amount of time. It's in these surreal, yet subdued, situations that you'll find both the game's most intriguing puzzles, and its meatiest ideas.

It's rare to see a science-fiction story as insightful and thought-provoking as this in any medium, let alone games. Play the original, play this, and then join us in impatiently waiting for the third entry in this astonishing trilogy.
■ ***Robin Valentine***



HOT DOWNLOADS

The latest DLC and expansions explored



After much teasing, Blizzard has confirmed and released its 27th **Overwatch** hero, **Brigitte**, daughter of Torbjorn. She's a new support character who combines healing with stalwart defensive abilities, and wields a tower shield to protect herself. She also has a flail that can blind and pull enemies from a distance. As a support/tank hybrid, she's sure to change things up for Overwatch's metagame.

Europa Universalis IV is growing too, with a big overhaul of the British forces in its **Rule Britannia** expansion. Included are new missions, national traits, units, and even some additions to the soundtrack.

If you're craving more exotic locales than our own fair shores, then why not take a trip back to ancient Egypt? **Assassin's Creed Origins** has added its **Curse of the Pharoahs** DLC, which sees Bayek entering the tombs of long-dead pharaohs, only to be sucked into their own versions of the afterlife for some spooky battles.

But perhaps you prefer shuffling cards to those who've shuffled off? Online card game **Gwent** has gotten a big new addition in the form of **Arena Mode**. This pits players against notorious villain Gaunter O'Dimm, last seen in The Witcher 3's DLC, and features gameplay similar to the Hearthstone mode of the same name. Rather than constructing a deck from your collection, you'll be drafting one from random selections offered to you, and can even end up with multiple factions in the same force.

The already massive **Elite: Dangerous** is expanding too, with the first chapter of its **Beyond** update, a series of overhauls that add new ships, trade routes and planet graphics as well as bringing extra depth to everything from missions to crime and punishment – just in case the thrill of being a space bounty hunter wasn't enough. And, of course, the Thargoid situation continues to develop. The updates will continue with subsequent chapters, each one reworking new parts of the game, and most of these features are free, with a few exclusive to season pass holders.



THIS MONTH IN...
RAMBLING ROADTRIPS

The lauded Kentucky Route Zero's last episode is finally imminent, alongside a release on PS4, Xbox, and Switch. A point-and-click adventure with a surreal style, coupled to an all-time great soundtrack, it tells the story of Conway, a driver who finds himself lost on an otherworldly highway. It's been quite a journey since its first episode – that initial instalment was released all the way back in 2013!















DJINN IN THE GAME

Win one of 15 copies of Shantae: Half-Genie Hero!

GamesMaster's about to make your wish come true this month. Well, assuming your wish is for a lovely 2D platformer to appear on your doormat.

That's right, thanks to our fine friends over at PQube, we've got 15 copies of Shantae: Half-Genie Hero Ultimate Edition for PS4 to give away.

This brilliant bundle, out in shops on 27 April for PS4 and Switch, marks the first time the game has been made available as a physical release in Europe. Inside you'll find not just a copy of the game, but also a colourful 100-page artbook and a soundtrack CD full of all the kickin' tunes from the game.

And that's not all! The Ultimate Edition is well-named, because it also contains absolutely every piece of content released for the game. That includes all the DLC, even the stuff previously exclusive to backers of the Kickstarter – plus a brand new costume too!

If you've never played Shantae before, this is the perfect chance to dive into her adorable world – and if you're a loyal series fan, then you need this definitive edition in your life.

So, want a go at winning your own copy of Shantae: Half-Genie Hero Ultimate Edition for PS4? All you have to do is head to our competition web page – address over on the right – and enter your details, plus the correct answer to the following question, by 26th April 2018:

Q What is Shantae's magical power?

A. Transformation

B. Necromancy

C. Boiling the perfect egg

HOW TO ENTER

ONLINE

Make your way over to bit.ly/gmshantae to enter, where you can fill in your details and submit your answer.


Rupture Farms is one of gaming's most oppressive locations.

Legend #64 of Gaming

ODDWORLD: ABE'S ODDYSEE

Maturing like a delicious cheese

In addition to ruining our ability to spell the word 'odyssey' forever, Oddworld was quite the standout. There was simply nothing else like it, then or since. The 'Odd' in the game's title is certainly well-earned.

The origin

Creator Lorne Lanning was originally an artist working in the film industry. He'd trained as a painter but fell in love with 3D graphics during the 1980s. It was while working on feature films and adverts that he met future Oddworld Inhabitants co-founder Sherry McKenna, a successful producer who had become a Hollywood executive in computer animation.

The two worked together for some time in Hollywood before Lanning eventually proposed the idea of Oddworld Inhabitants. He suspected that 3D graphics and animation would be integrated into videogames and when Sony announced the PlayStation, saw the ideal opportunity.

McKenna was not keen, however. When shown now-classic first-person shooter Doom as an example of the medium she found it ugly, and was not at all convinced of the potential. Instead, she saw Abe's story as a film, not a game.

It took two years of convincing before McKenna finally agreed to take the risk, provided Lanning could find the start-up money. Lanning found that when presenting the idea of Abe's Oddysee to potential investors, his unique experience in 3D animation gave him credibility, while the story-driven nature of the game attracted those who found no appeal in the violent, action-focused titles that dominated the medium. With a mere three million dollars he returned to McKenna and the pair moved to San Luis Obispo. There, in 1994, Oddworld Inhabitants was born.

The legend

Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee came out in 1997. It told the tale of Abe, a blue-skinned humanoid, and his people, the Mudokons, used as a slave workforce in the humongous meat factory of Rupture Farms. When he learnt that his people would be used as the next food source he – understandably – decided to escape. From there you guided him out of this capitalist nightmare, rescuing his fellow Mudokons on the way. Abe eventually made it to the wilderness beyond the massive factory where he reconnected with nature and discovered his spirituality before returning to destroy the factory once and for all.

Developer Oddworld Inhabitants
Publisher GT Interactive Software
Released 1997
Format PC, PS1
Get it Steam or PSN

At a time when most videogames were only dipping their toes in the pond of storytelling, Abe's Oddysee entered with focus and confidence. Its stunning visuals created a world that was simultaneously photorealistic and populated by alien creatures. Where platformers in the late '90s were abstract and nothing but a series of puzzles, Oddworld was driven by themes and character. This was a game where your main power, along with possessing soldiers, was the ability to talk to your fellow slaves and guide them to their escape. Even now, that's remarkable. Also, Abe could fart on command, and that's every bit as noteworthy. The game impresses still because of how organic it feels. Abe moves with weight and vulnerability, a far cry from Mario's effortless jumping. The world he inhabits feels like a real place, not merely a series of backdrops for action to take place against. The creatures and enemies he encounters along the way feel natural and driven by organic behaviour, rather than acting as obstacles for a player. Oddworld feels *alive*.

The story it tells still resonates. It's a tale warning of the evils of capitalism and industrialism, without ever patronising the player. The game's streak of humour is always at the expense of the characters, never poking fun at the story

> "THE STORY IT TELLS STILL RESONATES – A TALE WARNING OF THE EVILS OF INDUSTRIALISM"



Sections such as this laser tripwire puzzle are still memorable.





Don't be blue, Abe – the helpful fireflies will guide you!

or its themes. The ideas are ones that matter, perhaps even more now than two decades ago. Not bad for a debut game.

The legacy

Despite its many successes, Oddworld seemed to fade away with little impact. There were a few great sequels, but long-term few seemed interested in the kind of game Oddworld was. There were no clones or Oddworld-wannabes in the decade that followed.

Yet in recent years, that has begun to change. With the rise of indies and the return of the 2D platformer, especially the cinematic platformer, games have begun to revive the ideas of Oddworld. Its way of telling stories can be seen vividly in the outstanding Inside as well as other great games such as Little Nightmares and Deadlight, where the mechanics and challenges are defined by narrative.

Oddworld Inhabitants itself, after many years's absence, has now found new life. Working with dev Just Add Water, it released Oddworld: New'N'Tasty, a remake of Abe's Oddysee, to a positive reception and is now hard at work on Soulstorm, an expanded remake of the series' second title. ■ ***Sam Greer***

Studio Spotlight

It's been a weird road...

1 Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus

(PC, PS1 – 1998)

The massive follow up to Oddysee featured all-new locations, enemies, and abilities. This time Abe was on a quest to stop the corporation digging up the bones of his ancestors and literally using the tears of his people to create an addictive drink. This was the entry that allowed players to possess their own farts as well, so far a sadly underrepresented power in videogames.

2 Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee

(PC, PS Vita, PS3, Xbox – 2001)

The series' first jump to 3D was a real mixed bag. While it was certainly imaginative, it suffered from frustrating controls and many underdeveloped ideas. The series' humour remained but its sense of sincerity and seriousness was lost in the transition, creating a bit of a disappointment. New lead character Munch was easy to love, though, and his 'escaped lab animal' story was very endearing.

3 Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath

(PC, Wii U, PS Vita, PS3, Xbox – 2005)

After the disappointment of Munch's Oddysee this was a strong return to form. Stranger's Wrath was Oddworld's take on the Wild West, casting players as a secretive nomad and bounty hunter named Stranger, travelling around the land taking on its most wanted outlaws and ne'er-do-wells. His weapon of choice was a crossbow that used living critters as ammo, putting a new twist on FPS action.

4 Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty

(PC, PS4, XO, Wii U, PS Vita, PS3 – 2014)

A remake of Oddysee, this was the first Oddworld title in a decade. Made by Just Add Water, it retold Abe's first adventure in 3D, though kept the 2D plane of movement. Much of the game is the same, but a side-scrolling camera and new cutscenes brought a new perspective to the story. It sold well enough that the studio is now hard at work on an expanded remake of Exoddus, called Soulstorm.



SIX OF THE BEST... BLUE FOLK

No need to feel blue in this company!

If there's one colour videogame makers love to make their strange and alien characters more than any other, it's blue. From the Asari of Mass Effect to the Draenei of Warcraft, if there's an alien race you can be certain it's going to be azure in hue. Maybe they're expressing something, we dunno. But it's given us so many strange and interesting characters over the years that it seems right to celebrate the variety of these creations. Blue may be the go-to colour for developers making aliens and monsters, but the results are hardly ever the same... ■

ROGUE TROOPER

Rogue Trooper (PC, PS4, XO, Xbox, PS2 - 2006)

From the pages of 2000AD, he's a genetically engineered super-soldier with a heart of gold and an arsenal operated by the consciousness of his dead army buddies. Because who wouldn't want to live on with a rifle for a body?

RAZIEL

Soul Reaver (PS1 - 1999)

Okay, he's only blue because he's old and rotting, but it still counts. A vampire plunged into the Well Of Souls after showing up his bloodthirsty boss Kain, he ended up in a bit of a sorry state, with only the ghost of a sword for company.

ABE

Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee (PC, PS1 - 1997)

He's a bit of a klutz and prone to gassy outbursts, but Abe's achieved a lot for a former floor waxer, liberating his people and taking down the evil Rupture Farms. It's hard to not love the guy.

LIARA T'SONI

Mass Effect (PC, PS3, 360 - 2007)

Trusted companion of Commander Shepard, this blue alien went from a socially awkward archaeologist to a deadly information broker. Now *that's* a career move. Her arc is one of Mass Effect's most memorable.

GLOBOX

Rayman 2: The Great Escape (PC, PS2, Dreamcast, PS1 - 2000)

Rayman's best buddy and all round goofball, Globox is a lovable big... frog... thing. Fun fact: he and his partner Uglette have an impressive 650 children. That's a lot of nappies.

MISSION VAO

Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic (PC, Xbox - 2003)

Bioware's original blue-skinned companion was a teenage Twi'lek scoundrel who spent her days hanging about with an exiled Wookiee nicknamed Big Z.

Grab Bag

Retro gems from every era

Awesome Boss!



Final Fantasy IX

Format PC, PS4, PS1 **Developer** Square **Released** 2000

Final Fantasy is a series with no shortage of camp villains, but the nihilistic Kuja really took the cake. With his flamboyant hair and outfit he looked like the lead singer in a glam rock band. More importantly (but possibly musically confusingly), his theme was one preposterous prog rock anthem - an absolute show-stealer. He was tough to beat, but it was a climactic battle for the ages.

Classic Moment!



Halo: Combat Evolved

Format PC, Xbox **Developer** Bungie **Released** 2001

After non-stop scrambling to rescue your own forces, this level was when you finally got, in the words of Captain Keyes, "a little payback". The now-classic music swelled, your dropships pulled onto the beach under fire, and you deployed into a seriously intense firefight. There was no time for cover or taking it slow, you just had to keep moving till the beach was clear.

Remake Request!



Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night

Format PS1, Saturn **Developer** Konami **Released** 1997

The embodiment of gothic camp. With the rebooted games finished and the new Netflix series having done so well, it seems like a great time to bring this classic back - and it'd be a good way to wash away the stink of Lords Of Shadow 2...







The statue's eyes glow, thanks to two LED lights, for added wow-factor.



Gaius' before shot shows how he's skilfully constructed using shaped cardboard, wire, and glue.

COOL-OSSUS CREATIONS!

What does it take to replicate some of videogaming's most memorable creatures? We talk to artist **Loren Russell** to find out

Any argument over the artistic credibility of videogames can be swiftly ended with four simple words: Shadow Of The Colossus. Team Ico's masterpiece takes you on a breathtaking adventure. Tasked with taking down 16 colossi, the sense of guilt you feel grows as each of the magnificent creatures crashes to the ground. (It's worse than the time we ate mum's last chocolate. And we *still* feel guilty about that.) It stands as one of the greatest artistic achievements ever committed to console, and has in turn inspired countless players to produce their own works of art - but Colorado-based artist Loren Russell's towers above the rest.

He decided to pay fitting tribute to the classic game with a 16-inch statue of the game's third Colossus, the imposing giant Gaius. It's meticulously detailed, from its moss-covered stonework to the eerie blue glow of its LED-powered eyes. But from humble paper and glue beginnings did this creature come: "After sketching out a very rough idea, I started to make the base armature," explains Russell. "Because I like making these on a budget from scratch I use scrap cardboard and hot glue." The cardboard was cut and shaped to replicate Gaius' frame before the LED lights were attached. Plaster cloth was then formed around the cardboard skeleton. "Once all of the plaster cloth has dried overnight I can begin painting," he says. "I usually use plain acrylic paints to make a base colour. Once I am satisfied with that, I paint detail and shadows on the exposed stone parts." Lastly, synthetic moss is added to give the statue a hyper-realistic look.

Giant task

Creating a model of this detail is a time-consuming process. Russell built Gaius over a period of four days, working on it for three or four hours per night. This isn't the first time he's based his work on Shadow of the Colossus; his first project, a statue of colossus Quadratus – constructed using a similar method to Gaius – also serves as a 500GB external hard drive. With the game now remastered for PS4, Russell is keen to relive the experience: "The world of Shadow Of The Colossus is mysterious and vast," he says. It draws you in with minimal dialogue and explanation, forcing you to push forward to learn more. By the time you are climbing the first colossus you are truly in awe at the game, from the art, the music, the atmosphere, and the sheer tension in slaying your first giant."

Inspired to create more art with a practical purpose, Russell also built a statue of everyone's favourite cat-bird, Trico, which doubles as a pair of computer speakers. It was made while players were growing increasingly more concerned that the game would be canned and Trico sent to that farm your parents told you about. "It was constantly in development limbo and I felt that if I would have anything tangible from the game I would have to make it myself!" he says. According to

> "I CAN PLUG GAIUS INTO MY PS4 USB AND HIS EYES WILL POWER ON ALONG WITH IT"



Russell hopes to fund his own videogame, Metalsona, via a Kickstarter campaign.



With his 500GB hard drive, Quadratus is the most stylish way to store data.



Another work of art based on a gaming gem; Russell enjoyed Journey so much he paid tribute to it with this statue made from household junk, plaster cloth, and paint.





Russell, The Last Guardian statue was the most challenging to make and is also his favourite among his collection. "I am constantly worried about moving it and dropping Trico. Though I do like the ease of using Gaius; I can actually plug him into my PS4 USB port and his eyes will power on along with the system."

Fighting fit

Loren recently turned his attention to a creative project of a different kind: he's been working on developing his own game, Metalsona. He describes it as "a mix of PlayStation 1-era RPGs and story similar to fighting anime like Dragon Ball Z or One-Punch Man, with a bit of good ol' sci-fi." It's a complex endeavour, and one that he's tackling solo, writing the game's code as well as creating the art and music in his spare time. "I love old-school RPGs like Final Fantasy, Xenogears, and Chrono Trigger, and would love to have the time necessary to make one myself," he says. "I tried a Kickstarter campaign with very early work from the game, and many people were asking for a playable demo. That is the project I am currently working on feverishly, as time (and my toddler daughter!) allow."

Sadly, his Kickstarter campaign didn't manage to reach its funding goal, but that hasn't dampened his spirits: "As soon as the demo is ready for a free release I would love to try again and get the game funded enough to take a year or two off to work on it full time."

While he's currently focused on building the Metalsona demo, Russell admits that he does have an itch to get back to making more physical art, and he's got a very fitting series in mind: "I am currently loving Monster Hunter: World and have been a Monster Hunter fan in general for years. I would love to make some art pieces for that series next!" Great Jagras desk lamp, anyone? ■ ***Anne-Marie Coyle***

SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS!

See this!

Want to see more? Check out all of Loren Russell's work, including the creation process for his statues, in his Imgur gallery here: bit.ly/gmloren



GLOBAL MASTER

Treat your nostrils with game-inspired aromas



OUTSIDE IN

If all the death and anguish in Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is too much, relax and unwind with this Ancient Trees And Rainfall scented candle. Created in collaboration with Gametee, you can feel like you're wandering the Viking wildlands while plopped pyjama-clad in front of the telly.

EAU DE BIRD

Those Angry Birds have dominated the mobile games market, starred in their own movie, *and* got their own fragrance line. Pick from Red Bird, Yellow Bird, or King Pig eau de toilette by Air-Val International. With all this success you'd think the furious flock would chill out a little…

PERFECT SCENTS

Pimp out your ride with this Mega Man scented air-freshener. Thankfully, it's not his actual scent – we can't imagine that suit offers much breathing space. Dubbed 'Cool Rush', this Epic-Scents air freshener adds a floral aroma to your automobile escapades.





NEXT MONTH...
GamesMaster 329
ON SALE 19 APRIL

INSIDE NEXT ISSUE...



STATE OF DECAY 2



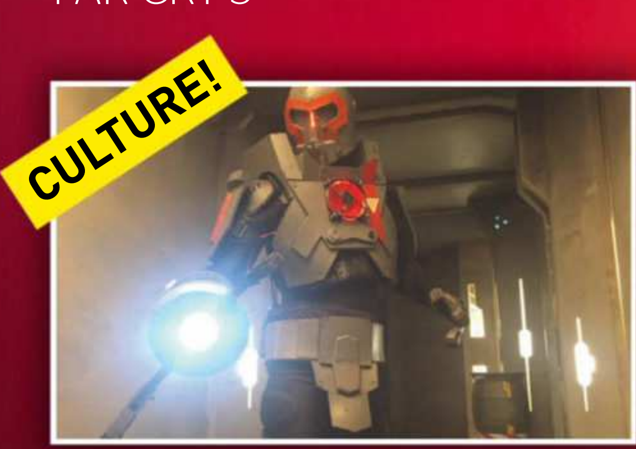
NINTENDO LABO



FAR CRY 5



A WAY OUT



LAST COMMANDERS



SYNDICATE

PLUS LOADS MORE!

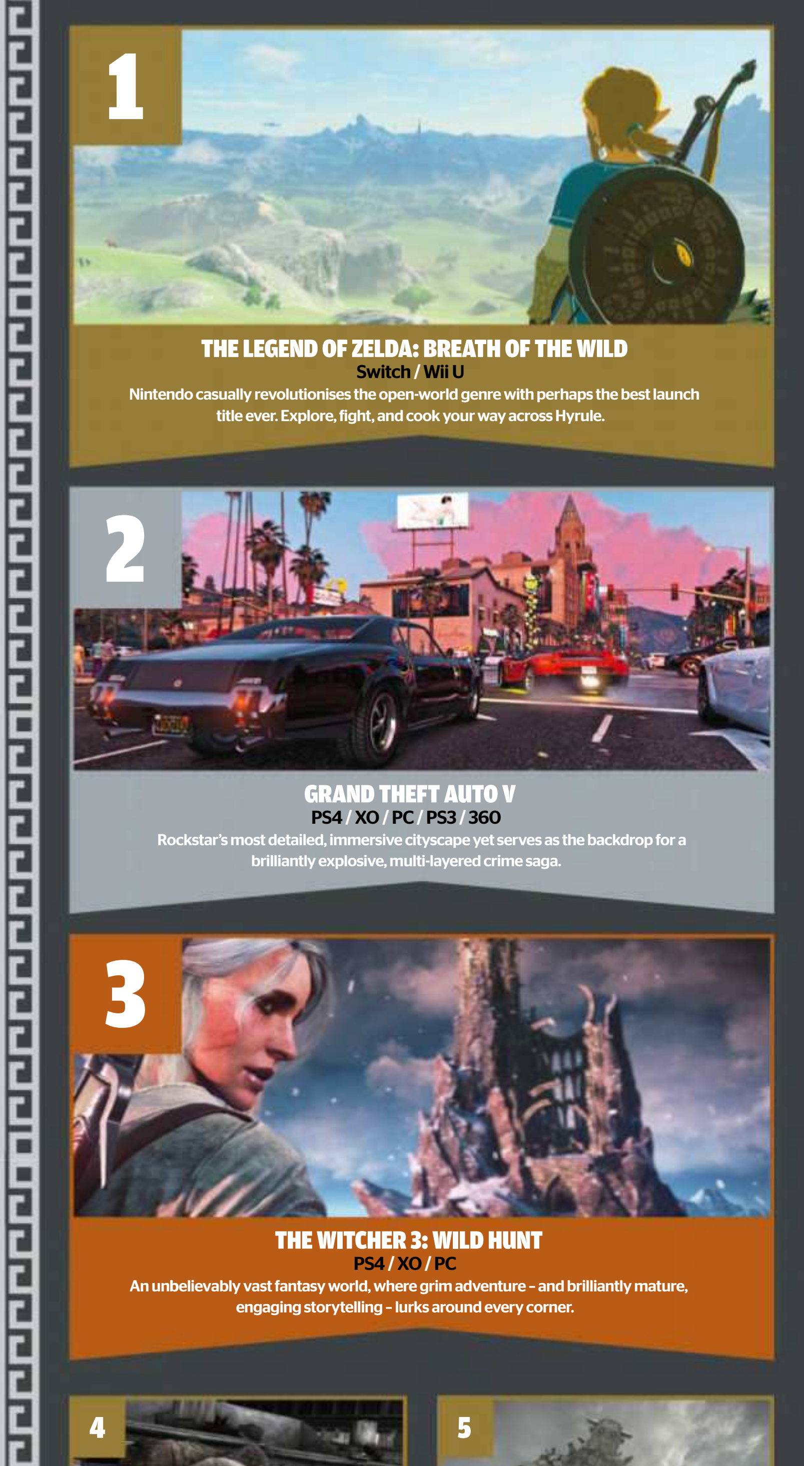
Due to the unpredictable nature of the gaming world, all contents are subject to change.

GamesMaster

GAME GUIDE

Our definitive list of the best games to play right now

Not sure which games to grab? Trust the experts (that's us) to shine a light of clarity through your fog of confusion. Over this spread you'll find GamesMaster's 100 per cent scientifically accurate and indisputable list of the greatest games on modern machines – updated monthly – as well as the top five most vital exclusives on each of the major platforms. Pick one of these up and, buddy, you're going to have yourself a good time.



1

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD
Switch / Wii U
Nintendo casually revolutionises the open-world genre with perhaps the best launch title ever. Explore, fight, and cook your way across Hyrule.



2

GRAND THEFT AUTO V
PS4 / XO / PC / PS3 / 360
Rockstar's most detailed, immersive cityscape yet serves as the backdrop for a brilliantly explosive, multi-layered crime saga.



3

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT
PS4 / XO / PC
An unbelievably vast fantasy world, where grim adventure – and brilliantly mature, engaging storytelling – lurks around every corner.



4

THE LAST OF US
PS4 / PS3
Naughty Dog's greatest triumph yet: the dark and truly cinematic tale of Joel and Ellie, two survivors in a dying world.



5

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
PS4
A perfect remake of a genuinely awe-inspiring adventure. So good we gave it our first ever 100% review score back in GM327.



DARK SOULS III
PS4 / XO / PC
Take on some of gaming's most unforgiving enemies in weighty, impactful battles. There are few games more satisfying to beat.



PERSONA 5
PS4 / PS3
The greatest JRPG on current-gen – a stylish, rebellious story of teenage fury and surreal journeys into your enemies' minds.


8

MONSTER HUNTER WORLD
PS4 / XO / PC
The once-cult series finally hit the mainstream with this stunning entry. Hunt big dinosaurs with your mates and make armour from their bits!


9

HORIZON: ZERO DAWN
PS4
A truly unique vision from the creators of Killzone. Primitive humans hunt robotic beasts across a beautiful wilderness.


10

SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY
Switch / Wii U
Switch's first Mario game is also one of the best ever, taking you on an unashamedly joyous, globe-trotting adventure.


11

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
PS4
An incredible end to one of the most spectacular series around, seeing Nathan Drake off in style. One of the best-looking games ever made.


12

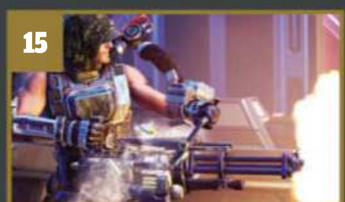
FORZA MOTORSPORT 7
XO / PC
The best entry in the series yet, and one of the greatest racing games ever made. It's absolutely gorgeous to boot.


13

OVERWATCH
PS4 / XO / PC
Colourful characters and slick shooting make this multiplayer FPS from the makers of World Of Warcraft utterly irresistible.


14

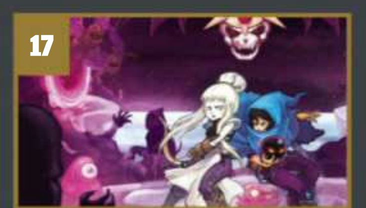
MARIO KART 8
Switch / Wii U
The definitive kart racer, now portable and packed with new features on Switch. Own a Nintendo console? This is a must-have.


15

XCOM 2
PS4 / XO / PC
A turn-based strategy masterpiece that doesn't pull its punches. Try not to get too attached to your soldiers, eh?


16

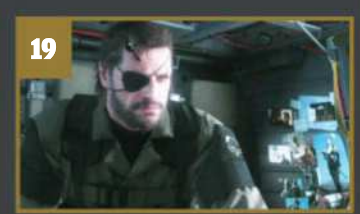
MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR
PS4 / XO / PC
Solid third-person action elevated by its incredible system of procedurally-generated orcs, each with their own personality.


17

TOWERFALL ASCENSION
Switch / PS4 / XO / PC / PS Vita
A true legend of local multiplayer action that still eats up our office lunchtimes to this day. The very definition of easy to learn, hard to master.


18

HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE
PS4 / PC
A harrowing journey into a mythological underworld serves as the perfect backdrop to an exploration of real-world mental illness.


19

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN
PS4 / XO / PC / PS3 / 360
Hideo Kojima's last hurrah brings open-world action to the revered series.


20

DOTA 2
PC
A strange and intimidating beast - but take the time to learn its secrets and you'll find a game of incredible tactical depth and variety.


21

HEARTHSTONE
PC / Mobile
Blizzard achieves the once-impossible - making deck-building CCGs accessible to all. Prepare to lose all your free time in 15-minute chunks.


22

MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOMS BATTLE
Switch
Don't let its cute looks fool you - this is a tight and devilishly difficult turn-based strategy game.



BLOODBORNE
PS4
Dark Souls' more agile cousin, tighter and faster but no less punishing, in a world of gothic horror and Lovecraftian nightmares.


24

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD
PS4 / XO / PC
First-person horror action that both pays fitting tribute to the series' past, and tries something totally different. Even more terrifying in VR.


25

PYRE
PS4 / PC
This spellbinding follow-up to Bastion seamlessly blends intricate storytelling with... well, magical basketball, basically. Trust us, it works.

THE TOP EXCLUSIVES
The five best for each console



1. FORZA MOTORSPORT 7
2. HALO 5: GUARDIANS
3. KALIMBA
4. QUANTUM BREAK
5. GEARS OF WAR 4



1. THE LAST OF US REMASTERED
2. SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
3. HORIZON: ZERO DAWN
4. UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
5. HELLBLADE



1. THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD
2. SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY
3. MARIO KART 8 DELUXE
4. MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOM BATTLE
5. ARMS



1. DOTA 2
2. TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II
3. GUILD WARS 2
4. THE SIMS 4
5. CRUSADER KINGS 2



1. POKÉMON SUN AND MOON
2. FIRE EMBLEM FATES
3. ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF
4. MONSTER HUNTER GENERATIONS
5. THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS



1. HEARTHSTONE
2. DEVICE 6
3. 80 DAYS
4. SORCERY 4
5. MONUMENT VALLEY



SILHOUETTE SLASHERS

Can you identify these famous gaming monsters?

Answers: 1. The Alien (Alien Isolation) 2. Pyramid Head (Silent Hill 2) 3. Dr Salvador/Chainsaw Man (Resident Evil 4) 4. Cacodemon (Doom) 5. Big Daddy (Bioshock)


Gaijin
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PC
PS4
XBOX


7
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